

174 TRAIL-TESTED PRODUCTS

BACKPACKER

THE OUTDOORS AT YOUR DOORSTEP

GEAR GUIDE

2015's BEST NEW GEAR

EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS
THE LIGHTEST, TOUGHEST, BEST-VALUE GEAR

ULTRALIGHT MADE EASY
33 PICKS AND COMFORT TIPS

ULTIMATE FIX-IT GUIDE

31 TIPS FOR TENTS, BOOTS & MORE



HOW TO IMPROVE PACK COMFORT
GET BOOTS THAT FIT
SLEEP BETTER, CARRY LESS



A LOT OF GEAR WAS HARMED IN THE MAKING OF THIS ISSUE.



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Subaru and Outback are registered trademarks. *EPA-estimated hwy fuel economy for 2015 Subaru Outback 2.5i models. Actual mileage may vary. †Based on EPA-estimated hwy fuel economy for 2015 model vehicles within the IHS Automotive, Polk Non-Luxury Midsize CUV segment. Actual mileage may vary. **MSRP excludes destination and delivery charges, tax, title, and registration fees. Retailer sets actual price. 2015 Subaru Outback 2.5i Limited pictured has an MSRP of \$29,995. Vehicle shown with available accessories.

BACKPACKER



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EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS
We torture-tested scores of products to separate the great from the merely good. From lighted tents to a jacket you'll never take off, here are 13 winners that raise the bar higher than ever.

33
PACKS
Big days. Fast-and-light weekends. Peakbagging vacations. Weeklong epics. Whatever your plans, you'll find a pack to match among these 17 picks.

51
FOOTWEAR
We suffered more than a few blisters over 10,000 miles of testing. Result: field-proven trail runners, light hikers, midweights, and heavy-duty boots. Don't say we never do anything for you.

69
TENTS
Minimalist campers will love the latest crop of ultralight shelters. Storm-seekers will appreciate the bombproof fortresses. Value-hunters will dig the bargains. And everyone will like staying dry.

85
BAGS
We took these bags below their temperature ratings to find out just how warm they really are. Bottom line: We lost sleep so you won't. Hit snooze with one of these toasty sacks (and cushy pads).

97
SHELLS
This year's best jackets sound too good to be true—lighter, more breathable, stretchier, even cheaper—but we're happy to report that wearing is believing. Stay comfortable in all conditions with these 14 hard- and softshells.

113
ULTIMATE FIX-IT GUIDE
Make your gear last with step-by-step instructions for repairing ripped shells, broken tent poles, worn boots, balky stoves, and more.

119
ESSENTIALS
Cook better. Boost camp comfort. Protect your eyes and improve your photos. Upgrade every trip with these 78 field-proven products.

120 KITCHEN
124 CANOEING
125 ACCESSORIES
126 SUNGLASSES
128 CLIMBING

129 KNIVES
130 MEN'S APPAREL
132 WOMEN'S APPAREL

134 CAMERAS
135 GPS
136 FOOD
138 KIDS'

On the cover Gregory Baltoro 75 (page 28) and La Sportiva LS Trango Cube GTX (page 67)
Photo by Andrew Bydlon. Styling by Emily Choi

Editor's note 6 **Our busiest testers** 144

by Dennis Lewon

Living the Test

We go to great lengths to find the best gear because we know where it takes you.

It's been more than two decades since BACKPACKER first launched a spring gear guide. A lot has changed since then. We now have lighted tents (page 18), more breathable shoes (page 13), and GPS watches (page 135), to cite just a few upgrades. But one thing hasn't changed: the way we test gear.



SUNSET IN CALIFORNIA'S ANCIENT BRISTLECONE PINE FOREST



CONFIDENT WHEN IT MATTERS



ODIN MOON
LIGHT JACKET

The essential adventure jacket: lightweight, waterproof, windproof, and breathable.



VERTEX STRETCH
MIDLAYER

A versatile stretch midlayer for fast-paced outdoor pursuits.

Wind tunnels and rain rooms are great, but nothing can replace real-world testing. It's the only way to understand how a tent pitches after dark, in a storm, with no instructions (yes, we know that happens despite the best intentions to practice setup at home). And how can you determine if a pack's suspension does what it claims unless you load it up and go for a good, long hike?

That's why we've enlisted plenty of expert help to test hundreds of new products and find the very best, which are featured in the following pages. All told, 164 testers contributed to the effort (meet two of them on page 144).

Another thing that hasn't changed over the years: BACKPACKER staffers get their boots dirty, too. Prioritizing trail time is simply part of this magazine's DNA. That means long office hours followed by frenzied Friday planning (we understand the weekend warrior schedule). But it would be worth it even if we weren't testing gear for this issue. Have you ever regretted a night under the stars?

Last fall, some friends and I hiked a 30-mile loop in Colorado's Indian Peaks Wilderness. We were testing four packs, three shells, two tents, two pads, a sleeping bag, a stove, and boots. Between the scree fields and thunderstorms, we learned plenty about the gear. But what I remember several months later is the afternoon we bushwhacked to a small, off-trail lake, in search of a campsite, and startled a moose who had already claimed the spot.

Later, as we pored over evaluation forms and started writing reviews for this issue, I asked our staffers and contributors to recall some of their best experiences from this season of testing as well. Because good gear is really just a means to an end. And the end is all about moments like these.



Kristin Hostetter,
gear editor
"In Austria, I completed my first via ferrata. It was a white-knuckle trip—and totally worth it."



Casey Lyons,
senior editor
"Seeing dusk settle over the Northgate Peaks from an off-trail site in Zion National Park."



Rachel Zurer,
senior content editor
"Hiking in the dunes at Death Valley at sunrise. We were looking for a missing pair of boots (we found them). What a great excuse for a sunrise hike."



Andrew Bydlon,
multimedia specialist
"Scrambling down from California's Palisade Glacier, in the eastern Sierras, at twilight."



Elisabeth Kwak-Hefferan,
Northwest field editor
"Standing on the edge of Ireland's Slieve League cliffs, a sheer, 2,000-foot drop straight down to the Atlantic."

HELLY HANSEN CATWALK

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HELLYHANSEN.COM



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AK

Foggy Mountain Sports
134 N. Franklin St.
Juneau, AK 99801
Nugget Men's
9107 Mendenhall Mall Road #301
Juneau, AK 99801

AL

Merrell – The Summit
200 Summit Blvd, Suite 450
Birmingham, AL 35243

AR

Gearhead Outfitters
6000 W. Markham St. #1034
Little Rock, AR 72201

Gearhead Outfitters
17821 Chenal Parkway #111
Little Rock, AR 72223

Gearhead Outfitters
230 S. Main St.
Jonesboro, AR 72401

AZ

Summit Hut
5045 E. Speedway
Tucson, AZ 85712

Summit Hut
7745 North Oracle Rd.
Tucson, AZ 85704

CA

Eastside Sports

224 North Main St.

Bishop, CA 93514

Kittredge Sports

3218 Main St.

Mammoth Lakes, CA 93546

Legend Island Outfitter

507 Crescent Ave.

Avalon, CA 90704

Mel Cotton's

1266W San Carlos St.

San Jose, CA 95126

Merrell – Union Square

285 Geary St.

San Francisco, CA 94102

Merrell – Westfield Galleria at Roseville

1151 Galleria Blvd.

Roseville, CA 95678

Mountain Air Sports

14 State St.

Santa Barbara, CA 93101

Mountain Sports

176 E. 3rd St.

Chico, CA 95928

Outdoor World

2720 S Rodeo Gulch Rd.

Soquel, CA 95073-2026

Pacific Marine Engineering

1600 5th St.

Eureka, CA 95501

Sonoma Outfitters

2412 Magowan

Santa Rosa, CA 95405

Tahoe Mountain Sports

11200 Donner Pass Rd. Unit 5E

Truckee, CA 96161

Tahoe Sports

4000 Lake Tahoe Blvd. Unit 7

South Lake Tahoe, CA 96150

CO

Boulder Running Company

2500 E First Ave.

Denver, CO 80206

Gardenswartz Outdoors

780 Main St.

Durango, CO 81301

Jagged Edge

223 East Colorado Ave.

Telluride, CO 81435

Kristi Mountain Sports

3223 Main St.

Alamosa, CO 81101

Merrell – Park Meadows

8401 Park Meadows Center Dr.

Lone Tree, CO 80124

Plum Creek Shoe Station

135 Moraine

Estes Park, CO 80517

Ptarmigan Sports

137 Main St Suite C104E

Edwards, CO 81632

Steamboat Shoe Market

908 Lincoln Ave.

Steamboat Springs, CO 80487

Treads n' Threads

113 N. Main

Gunnison, CO 81230

CT

EMS

Danbury Fair Mall 7 Backus Ave.

Danbury, CT 06810

FL

Black Creek Outfitters

10051 Skinner Lake Rd.

Jacksonville, FL 32246

L D Plant dba Travel Country

1101 E. Hwy. 436

Altamonte Springs, FL 32701

GA

Masada Leather

238 Clayton St.

Athens, GA 30601

Merrell – The Forum on Peachtree

5185 Peachtree Parkway

Norcross, GA 30092

Mission Source

5975 Shiloh Rd. Suite 112

Alpharetta, GA 30005

IA

Active Endeavors

4520 University Ave. Suite 130

West Des Moines, IA 50266

Active Endeavors

3950 Elmore Ave.

Davenport, IA 52807

Active Endeavors

138 S. Clinton Street

Iowa City, IA 52240

Fin & Feather

125 Highway 1 West

Iowa City, IA 52246

ID

Element Outfitters

1570 Yellowstone Ave.

Pocatello, ID 83201

Tri State Outfitters

1104 Pullman Rd

Moscow, ID 83843

IL

Bushwhacker

4700 N. University Ave.

Peoria, IL 61614

Champaign Surplus

303 South Neil

Champaign, IL 61820

Moosejaw – Chicago

1444 West Webster Ave. #9

Chicago, IL 60614

Uncle Dan's

9101 Terminal Ave.

Skokie, IL 60077

Wild Country

203 S. Linden

Normal, IL 61761

IN

Green Earth Outdoors

PO BOX 72

Lanesville, IN 47136

Merrell – Carmel

13422 Clayton Rd. Suite 204

Carmel, IN 46032

KY

J&H Outfitters

189 Moore Dr.

Lexington, KY 40503

Nat's Outdoors

11121 Wilkinson Trace

Bowling Green, KY 42103

Quest For The Outdoors

4600 Shelbyville Rd.

Louisville, KY 40207

Quest For The Outdoors

4340 Summit Plaza Dr.

Louisville, KY 40241

LA

Gearhead Outfitters

1133 Saint Vincent Ave. #445

Shreveport, LA 71104

Massey's

509 N. Carrollton Ave.

New Orleans, LA 70119

The Backpacker

7656 Jefferson Hwy

Baton Rouge, LA 70809

MA

EMS

1041 Commonwealth Ave.

Boston, MA 02215

EMS

300 Needham St.

Newton, MA 02464

EMS

One Brattle Square 2nd Floor

Cambridge, MA 02138

Merrell – Holyoke Mall at Ingleside

50 Holyoke St. SPC A-204

Holyoke, MA 01040-2709

Merrell – Legacy Place

717 Legacy Pl

Dedham, MA 02026

MD

Hudson Trail Outfitters

1079 Annapolis Mall

Annapolis, MD 21401

Hudson Trail Outfitters

12085 Rockville Pike

Rockville, MD 20852

ME

Acadia Shops

14 West Eden Ave.

Bar Harbor, ME 04609

Cadillac Mountain Sports (2 Stores)

26 Cottage St.

Bar Harbor, ME 04609

L.L. Bean

95 Main Street

Freeport, ME 04032

MI

American Medical Services

1840 Enterprise Dr

Rochester Hills, MI 48309

Ann Arbor Bivouac

336 S. State

Ann Arbor, MI 48104

Bill and Paul's Sporthaus

1200 E. Paris

Grand Rapids, MI 49546

Gazelle Sports – Grand Rapids

15311 36th SE

Grand Rapids, MI 49512

Gazelle Sports – Holland

24 West 8th St.

Hollan, MI 49423

Gazelle Sports – Kalamazoo

South Kalamazoo Mall

Kalamazoo, MI 49007

Moosejaw – Birmingham

34288 Woodward Ave.

Birmingham, MI 48009

Moosejaw – East Lansing

555 East Grand River Ave.

East Lansing, MI 48823

Moosejaw – Grosse Pointe

17037 Kercheval Ave.

Grosse Pointe, MI 48230

Moosejaw – Partridge Creek

17370 Hall Rd.

Clinton, MI 48038

Moosejaw – Rochester

154 N. Adams Rd.

Rochester Hills, MI 48309

Plamondon's Shoes

144 E. Front

Traverse City, MI 49684

Playmakers

2299 W. Grand River

Okemos, MI 48864

The Earth's Edge

705 S. Beacon Blvd.

Grand Haven, MI 49417

MN

Bender's Shoe & Sport

409 First Ave. NW

Grand Rapids, MN 55744

Joe's Sporting Goods & Ski Shop

33 Country Rd. B

St. Paul, MN 55117

Lake Superior Trading Post

10 S. 1st Ave. W.

Grand Marais, MN 55604

Merrell – Mall of America

282 North Garden

Bloomington, MN 55425

Midwest Mountaineering

309 Cedar Ave. S.

Minneapolis, MN 55454

Nokomis Shoe Shop

4950 34th Ave.

Minneapolis, MN 55417

Trailfitters Duluth

600 E. Superior St.

Duluth, MN 55802

Tyrol Ski & Sport

1923 2nd St. SW

Rochester, MN 55902

Valley Bike and Ski

7707 149th St. W.

Apple Valley, MN 55124

MO

Alpine Shop

440 N. Kirkwood Rd.

St. Louis, MO 63122

Moosejaw – Kansas City

439 West 47th St.

Kansas City, MO 64112

Ozark Adventures

1111 East Republic Rd. Suite 140

Springfield, MO 65804

MT

Montana Bootlegger

Southgate Mall 2901 Brooks

Missoula, MT 59801

Schnee's

35 E. Main St.

Bozeman, MT 59715

Sylvan Peak


9 N. Broadway

Red Lodge, MT 59068

NC

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food freedom.



WHAT'S FUELING
YOUR ADVENTURE?

JETBOIL.COM    #JETBOIL

A full-page photograph of a mountain landscape. In the foreground, a blue and red sleeping bag with a colorful patterned pillow is on a rocky outcrop. In the middle ground, a calm lake reflects the surrounding mountains and trees. In the background, a large, rugged mountain peak rises against a clear sky. The text 'EDITORS' CHOICE 2015' is in the top right, with a boot print graphic and 'BACKPACKER' below it.

EDITORS'
CHOICE
2015

BACKPACKER

We dragged hundreds of products around the globe for a year, looking for the best performance, the biggest innovations, and the sweetest bang for the buck. Then we took the finalists to the Sierra Nevada and Death Valley for a last shakedown. The result: 13 winners for your wish list.



Clockwise from top left: Death Valley's dunes at sunset; the Palisade Glacier is the largest in the Sierra Nevada; chasing the day's last light through a forest of ancient bristlecone pines; Second Lake, below Temple Crag in the John Muir Wilderness.



CALIFORNIA DREAMING

Follow our footsteps: We hit the eastern Sierras' John Muir Wilderness, the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest, and Death Valley National Park. Hike beta: backpacker.com/EChike15. Travel beta: visitcalifornia.com



The Final Round

Eight BACKPACKER staffers circle around a still-warm camp stove as the moon rises over 12,982-foot Temple Crag, in California's John Muir Wilderness. Moonlight reflects off of Second Lake and the cirque's new dusting of snow. Our bellies are full, our muscles sore, and the cones of light from our headlamps illuminate notebooks, spreadsheets full of gear specs, and torn-out pages of catalogs. A titanium flask makes the rounds. And so the great gear debate begins. We talk through each item on the master list of final contenders for our annual

Editors' Choice Awards. After months and months of testing—from New Zealand to Alaska—the anecdotes have piled up like campfire tinder. Some products incite passionate opinions and heated discussions. Others fade under the scrutiny of testers with a combined 85 years on the job.

We perform this ritual each night of our weeklong adventure, culling 50-odd finalists down to the very best. This year, the debates unfold during a mountains-to-desert California road trip—and by the end, we fight, claw, and shout our way to consensus. Believe it: These 13 products are worth coveting.

Higher than a low-cut and lower than a midcut, the Synthesis proved both stable and agile on Death Valley's off-trail terrain.



La Sportiva Synthesis Mid GTX

Waterproof/breathable gets a lot more breathable.

Many boots have waterproof dialed, but when it comes to breathable, we're often looking at our blistered toes and asking, *Compared to what?* From now on, it's compared to this. Equipped with Gore-Tex's new Surround technology (see page 62), the Synthesis vents heat 360 degrees by adding an airy, perforated footbed that sits atop a foam spacer and pushes moisture out side vents with every step. We tested this technology in a few other boots this year and found it works best

in the lightweight, meshy Synthesis. Not even our sweatiest-footed tester—who'd been resigned to getting blisters in waterproof shoes—could swamp these things. How does it hike? The compression-molded EVA midsole offers sufficient support for a standard weekend load over rocky terrain, and a durable PU exoskeleton boosts protection. An aggressively lugged Vibram outsole boosts traction. ▶ \$180; 1 lb. 5 oz. per pair (w's 37); m's 38-47.5, w's 36-43; sportiva.com



EC LIVE

See video reviews shot in the field, plus behind-the-scenes footage from our test trip in the iPad edition and at backpacker.com/EC2015.



The MiniMo comes with a canister stand for better stability.

Jetboil MiniMo

This stove system packs tiny and does it all: lightning-fast boils, quiet simmers, and everything in between.

The MiniMo upends what we thought we knew about “personal cook systems,” the integrated stove/pot design that Jetboil pioneered in 2004. Like its predecessors, the MiniMo has lightning-fast boil times (it averaged 2 minutes and 21 seconds for 20 ounces at room temp in our controlled test) and efficient fuel consumption (expect about 9 liters of boiled water for a 3.5-ounce fuel canister). But, unlike all its predecessors, it can actually simmer: We kept a pot of soup over a low flame for nearly 10 minutes without adjusting the stove or scorching our meal. The trick? A larger regulator and more finely tunable fuel flow allow for unprecedented control, even at high

elevations. And while the simmering is what seduced us, we also like the 1-liter pot’s key features: PVC-coated, flip-out metal handles for easier pouring; a stay-put lid with drinking spout and strainer; and an included pot stabilizer and 10-ounce plastic bowl. And if you want more capacity for your elaborately simmered meals, check out the newly redesigned, 1.8-liter Sumo, which uses the same burner. Minor gripes: Simmering worked best in calm, wind-free conditions; canisters larger than 3.5 ounces won’t pack inside the pot; and the Piezo ignition, as is common with such sparkers, had trouble starting at altitudes above 8,000 feet. ▶ \$130; 15.7 oz.; jetboil.com

The logo for Outdoor Research, featuring a stylized 'OR' in white on a black background, followed by the words 'OUTDOOR' and 'RESEARCH' in a sans-serif font.The Polartec Alpha logo, consisting of a red stylized 'A' made of three parallel lines.

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Alpha®

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The Deviator Hoody combines cutting-edge Polartec® Alpha® insulation with our Hybrid Mapped construction, ensuring the perfect amount of breathability and warmth where each is needed most. Designed for stop-and-go endeavors like hiking and backpacking, the Deviator is ideal when you're working up a sweat under a pack, thanks to wicking Polartec® Power Dry® High Efficiency™ gridded fleece in the hood, sleeves and back panel.

Left: BYO carabiner, and the Drop clips to anything. Below: The X-Pot will come in three more sizes in July.



Kestrel Drop D1

Never guess at the temperature again.

Next time we see a forecast for -1°F and windy, we'll know exactly how to dress. That's how cold it got on an early-season Colorado snowshoe trip, and it turns out those mittens mom bought keep us warmer than we expected. Also, our too-big 15°F bag started feeling chilly with lows around 35°F, and that mesh-walled summer tent didn't hold in our body heat at all on a 33°F night. You could say this level of temperature precision is just for geeks, but we love having the hard data to be able to match the forecast to our personal preferences and gear. It's all because we've been carrying the Drop, a weather logger the size of a Double Stuf Oreo. This nifty gadget, which runs on a watch battery, takes and stores a temperature reading every few minutes (you set the interval), then downloads it to a smartphone app (iPhone only at the moment; Android coming). As soon as we started carrying the Drop, we became addicted to the data, especially overnight lows and daytime highs. The D1 logs just temp; the D2 (\$149) also senses humidity, heat index, and dew point. You can connect via Bluetooth even without cell service, and the app lets you export data to a spreadsheet. Nitpick: The only way to stop logging is to remove the battery (which lasts about four months), so we have lots of data about our closets. ▶ \$89; 1.3 oz.; kestrelmeters.com

Sea to Summit X-Pot

Behold the world's most packable cook pot.

How's this for a magic trick? Turn a 1-inch-tall disk into a 2.8-liter pot with the flick of your wrist. It's easy with the X-Pot, which has silicone walls that fold in on themselves, shrinking the pot down from 4.5 inches tall. The innovation solves the main problem with cookware: Pots are bulky and cumbersome. But shrinking isn't the X-Pot's only talent. We found the flexible walls easy to scrape clean, and the hard-anodized aluminum base shed even a layer of caked-on scrambled brownie. It's a bit heavier than an all-aluminum pot, and you need to take care not to expose the silicone to direct flame (simply avoid the campfire), but those are minor compromises for the ease of packing what's usually our kit's most awkward item.

▶ \$50; 11.5 oz.; seatosummit.com



PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON (LEFT); ANDREW BYDLON.
TEXT BY RACHEL ZURER




ORGANIC COTTON

Cotton is a natural fiber, but conventionally grown cotton is one of the dirtiest crops on the planet. Organic cotton is farmed without the usual mix of synthetic pesticides, herbicides, defoliants and fertilizers. It uses non-GMO seeds and leverages nature-based solutions to manage pests and build healthy soil. We've used only organic cotton since 1996. Learn more and see all of our organic cotton products online. [patagonia.com/organiccotton](https://www.patagonia.com/organiccotton)

patagonia

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Depending on the tent's size, mtnGLO adds only 2 to 6 ounces and \$30 to \$50.

Big Agnes mtnGLO

It's the best thing to happen to tents since aluminum poles.

A tent with a built-in disco ball might get more buzz, but only just. With mtnGLO, your tent-bound nights are guaranteed to be a whole lot more fun. It's equal parts party and practical. Stuck in a storm? Play cards and kick back beneath mini LED lights that cast a glow throughout the tent—instead of a partner who keeps shining a headlamp in your eyes. Adding virtually no weight or bulk, mtnGLO integrates strings of tiny LED bulbs into tents' overhead seams to offer soft, consistent light. The system uses a business-card-size switch that holds three AAA batteries (according to Big Agnes, battery life is

about 90 hours, depending on tent size). The LEDs are sewn into 14 BA tents, from family basecampers to ultralight models. You can also retrofit the mtnGLO Tent Light Accessory Kit (\$40; 3 oz.) to any tent you already have, and, if you're going deluxe, the mtnGLO PowerCase/Loft with Joey T55 (\$200) adds a battery pack to charge electronics. Two settings—high and low—cover the range of lighting needs (most testers found full brightness adequate for reading, while dim is perfect for hang-out sessions). And, best of all, it makes every night feel like Christmas Eve. ► bigagnes.com



RECYCLED POLYESTER

We began making recycled polyester from plastic soda bottles in 1993—the first outdoor clothing manufacturer to transform trash into fleece. By reducing the amount of virgin polyester in many of our products, and replacing it entirely with recycled polyester in some, we reduce our need for petroleum to make raw materials and cut landfill and incinerator waste. Learn more and see all of our recycled polyester products online.

patagonia.com/recycledpolyester

patagonia

Left: The Spark has a thermally efficient cut that saves weight. Below: The Sonic is roomier, allowing for deep-cold layering.



Mountain Hardwear HyperLamina Spark

Innovative construction brings down-like weight and packability to a synthetic bag.

We're a staff full of down snobs (no apologies), but for the first time ever, we found ourselves choosing synthetic over feathers on three-season trips down to 30°F—whether or not there was rain in the forecast. The Spark changed our minds, first and foremost, by disappearing into our packs. It squishes to 7 by 12 inches in the included compression sack—about the same size of a comparably priced down sack. Mountain Hardwear achieved this by welding its proprietary Thermal.Q insulation (longer fibers loft in curlicue shape, while shorter ones fill the spaces between) directly to the inside of the shell, eliminating redundant and bulky shingling. The resulting bag kept us warm to 35°F without so much as a cold spot (and we used it down to an impressive 20°F while wearing a puffy). Also, the two-way center zip makes it easy to sit up and do basic tent chores without getting all the way out of your bag. In icy weather, we could unzip from the bottom and stick out our little T-rex arms, or in milder temps we could unzip from the top and wear the bag more like a large, insulated cape. Either way, it beats getting out of your bag all at once. Extra credit: The reduced number of seams makes the interior feel like silk sheets against our skin. And that's something new to be snobby about. ▶\$220; 1 lb. 10 oz.; 35°F; mountainhardwear.com

NEMO Equipment Sonic

This versatile value lets you sleep comfortably from 0°F up to 40°F.

It's rare that a \$500 product is a steal, but the features and performance NEMO packed into the Sonic make this bag one of the best values of the year. Start with top-of-the-line, 850-fill duck down—same warmth as goose down, just cheaper—that ensures toasty comfort down to the 0°F temp rating. A hybrid baffle design trims cost relative to traditional vertical baffles: Since the vertical baffle chambers are only 26 inches instead of the entire length of the bag, they don't require pricey, internal mesh-wall construction to prevent down migration within the baffle. Also, the vertical alignment keeps the insulation over your core (it can't migrate from side to side) where you need it most. The horizontal baffles through the legs have stretch stitching for extra mobility—enough for one tester to change inside the fully zipped bag on a freezer-burn morning in Wyoming's Wind River Range. In warmer temps, unzip the two long gills on top of the bag to vent core heat; it's a big improvement on the cold toes we get by opening the footbox on conventional bags. Even with all this stuff, the Sonic is still at the lightweight end of its class. Only downside: The hood's bungee cord hangs on your face if you pull it all the way tight. ▶\$500; 2 lbs. 11 oz.; 0°F; nemoequipment.com



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Setting a new standard in high-power zoom lenses.

This extraordinary world's first¹ 18.8x zoom comes with Vibration Compensation and high-speed Piezo Drive autofocus, making the Tamron 16-300mm Di II VC PZD Macro a lens you can rely on for crisp, detailed wide-angle to long-telephoto shots.

For Canon, Nikon and Sony* mounts

*Sony mount without VC

¹As of March 2014 Source: Tamron





Inflating requires only about six breaths and deflation takes seconds thanks to a dump valve.

Sea to Summit Comfort Plus

This super-plush sleeping pad comes with an insurance policy.

We tested this mattress from the lowest valley in the United States to the highest peaks in Nepal, and the feedback always came back the same: This is the most comfortable night's sleep we've had on a pad this packable. Combine that with a unique design that uses two separate air chambers—giving you 1.25 inches of insurance against a leak—and you get our new favorite pad. Pump the bottom half to max capacity to lift you off any roots or rocks, and then fine-tune the top half to your preferred level of firmness. Five hundred forty-eight individual air cells provide structure and better support than

traditional horizontal or vertical chambers—even for restless sleepers. One tester deliberately inflated just one side (she had the insulated version), and despite sleeping on uneven, frozen terrain, she was still warm and comfy at 16,000 feet in Nepal. Sleep cold? The insulated model amps R-value from 1.5 to 5 for \$30 and 4.5 ounces more. And all this comfort still compresses to 4 by 7 inches. Bonus: The valves allow fine-tunable inflation and instant deflation. ▶\$170-\$220 (comes in four versions); 1 lb. 5 oz. (non-insulated regular mummy); 72"x21.5"x2.5"; seatosummit.com

Black Diamond Athlete Whitney Boland lives less than a mile from the Millbrook area of the Gunks. For her, the rock acts as a mirror, reflecting whatever she brings to it.



**LIVE.
CLIMB.
REPEAT.**



BlackDiamondEquipment.com



Princeton Tec Sync

Get a feature-packed headlamp for a song.

In the last few years, headlamps have been trending toward the super-techy, with rechargeable options, programmable lighting, ambient light sensors, swipe controls, and price tags that will drop your jaw (upwards of \$150). Which is exactly why we came to love this basic model. It's as simple and intuitive as it gets, yet still has all the features we want, and it costs only \$30. Rather than relying on complex electronics and a 12-page instruction manual, the Sync uses a simple, foolproof dial on the side of the housing, which lets you manually click back and forth through the five modes (red, spot, high flood, low flood, and max bright). According to our tests, it runs for about 70 hours on max bright before becoming too dim to use. In this case, the Sync has all the technology we want—and none we don't.

► \$30; 3 oz. (with 3 AAA batteries); princetonotec.com

The Sync casts a bright, 90-lumen beam well over 100 feet on high flood.



We wore the Deviator from brisk desert mornings to frigid alpine nights.

Outdoor Research Deviator Hoody

Pick a color you like, because you'll never take this jacket off.

Regardless of the temps or conditions—from chilly 30°F hikes at 11,000 feet in the John Muir Wilderness to cool camp evenings in the 50s in Death Valley to frigid Vermont ski days—the Deviator emerged as the layer everyone wanted to wear, both as a stand-alone and as part of a layering system. In fact, over the course of nearly a week, our gear editor threatened to harm anyone who tried to take it from her. And even after a no-shower week in the backcountry, she wore it on the plane home without eliciting dirty looks or scrunched noses from her neighbors. Perforated Polartec Alpha insulation lines the front of the core and provides a touch of insulation and max breathability during exertion, while a soft, wicking polyester liner and gridded Polartec High Efficiency fleece make the jacket sweatshirt-comfy. The cut is trim but not clingy, and the fabrics are stretchy and thin, so they never limited our movement during class 3 scrambles. The snug-fitting hood slips nicely under a helmet, and the whole thing scrunches down to grapefruit size. Our only gripe: We wish the hand pockets had zippers. But we're willing to overlook that—and accept the price—for a jacket that gets near-constant wear in a huge array of conditions. ► \$185; 9.2 oz. (w's M); outdoorresearch.com



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GETTING AWAY TO.

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Yellowstone National Park



The close, precision fit boosts stability with heavy loads, which we appreciated on a sketchy Death Valley ridge scramble.

Osprey Atmos AG/Aura AG

This pack raises the bar for big-load ventilation.

Hauling big loads can be a soul- and spine-crushing experience, but the Atmos's radical new AG (anti-gravity) suspension system throws conventional pack design out the window with stellar results (see page 36 for more background on how Osprey developed the AG suspension). Unlike most big packs, there's no foam padding or plastic framesheet in the backpanel. Instead, nonstretch mesh (with pencil-eraser-size holes) spans a steel perimeter wire throughout the back and continuously through the lumbar and hipbelt. It's that lumbar and hipbelt contact that's key: "It wraps gently but firmly around my hips—like a dance partner's hands—with no gaps or rubbing," one tester says. With

complete contact throughout the entire back of your body, you get no pressure points, excellent airflow, and superior load transfer. You also get good adjustability: The torso has 4 inches of play and the hipbelt extends up to 6 inches. Four compression straps (the lower two are V-shaped) connect directly to the frame, allowing you to squeeze down and stabilize smaller loads. Pockets aplenty kept us organized, and we liked the removable toplid (keep it attached for 9 liters of extra space or remove it and use the integrated flap cover, saving 6 ounces). Both the Atmos and Aura (the women's version) come in 50- and 65-liter models. ▶ \$230-\$260; 4 lbs. 2 oz. (Aura 65, M); ospreypacks.com

GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL IS ONLY GREAT IF YOU GET BACK.

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Editors' Choice Gold Awards

TIME-TESTED GEAR THAT'S BEST OF CLASS, THEN AND NOW



Gregory Baltoro/Deva

One of the best packs gets better.

Sometimes we cringe when a company announces a complete overhaul of a product we already love. We've seen some "redesigns" go in the wrong direction. But Gregory managed a tricky feat: preserving the essential DNA of the original, while improving every detail. The Baltoro's organization makes it easy to live out of on weeklong trips, and it has some features we'd like to see on every pack—like a waterproof hipbelt pocket that fits a smartphone and a clever hydration sleeve that converts into a daypack. "No need to think about it, you always have a summit pack with the capacity and comfort for shoulder-season, full-day hikes," says one tester. It's easy to get bottles in and out of the angled water bottle pocket without awkward contortions or enlisting a friend (though bottles can fall out if you bend all the way over; cinch the drawstring to secure them). Since 2008, we've loved the Baltoro's carry-everything dynamic suspension, which subdues big loads with uncommon comfort. "The well-padded hipbelt wraps wide around my hips," says a tester. "Hiking into the John Muir Wilderness in November, I loaded this guy with 48 pounds of cold-weather gear and group food, and felt good the whole hike in—my hips weren't even sore the next day." Bottom line: At more than 5 pounds it's a Cadillac, not a Ferrari, but for hikers who want a big-trip, big-comfort pack that'll last for years, the extra ounces are worth it. The Baltoro is available in 65-, 75-, and 85-liter models. Deva, the women's version, comes in 60, 70, and 80. ▶ \$299-\$349; 5 lbs. 7 oz. (Deva 70, S); gregorypacks.com

Left: The Baltoro's dynamic suspension moves with you, reducing rubbing. Below: The GigaPower's diminutive burner works best with small pots.

Snow Peak GigaPower Stove

Ounce- and penny-counters will love this reliable cooker.

Flashback to 1999: A Japanese company hit the U.S. scene with a number of elegant products, and the tiny, powerful GigaPower Stove became a staff favorite and Editors' Choice Award winner. Today, that stove is still tiny, still powerful, still a staff favorite, and, get this: It costs less than half what it did 15 years ago (adjusted for inflation). To be sure, there are plenty of higher-priced stoves on the market today that boil a bit faster or thwart wind a bit better, but for hikers on a budget, the GigaPower still nails the performance-to-price ratio. In our controlled tests, it logged boil times of just under 5 minutes (for 1 liter at room temperature). Plus, it's quiet, efficient (62 minutes of burn time for a 3.5-ounce canister), and it has a solid simmer, allowing us to gently cook soups and sauces. Bummer: Performance plummets with frozen canisters. ▶ \$40 (\$50 with Piezo ignition); 3.3 oz.; snowpeak.com



PHOTOS BY ANDREW BYDLON. TEXT BY DENNIS LEWON (GREGORY), KRISTIN HOSTETTER (SNOW PEAK)

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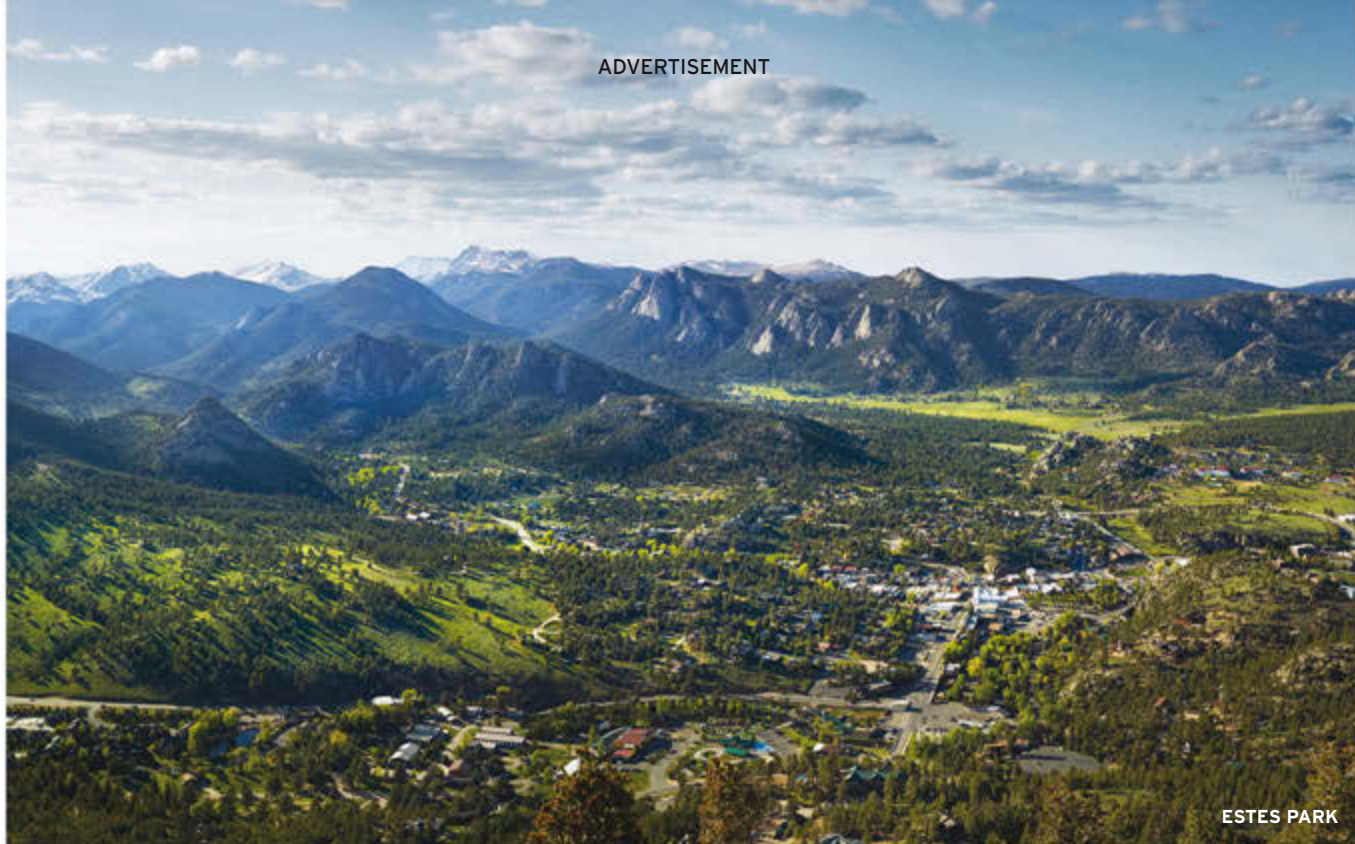
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ESTES PARK

100 YEARS, 10 GREAT WAYS TO CELEBRATE

BACKPACKER and Estes Park, CO, bring you a full dose of alpine fun in honor of Rocky Mountain National Park's 100th birthday.

1. CLIMB LONGS PEAK

Ascending the park's 14,259-foot crown is a rite of passage for scramblers. But you don't have to join the conga line: Camp at the Boulderfield (the National Park System's highest designated campsite) and beat the crowds with an early summit. For a more moderate adventure, take a day trip along the same trail to a midway point like Chasm Lake or the Boulderfield.

2. CATCH A TROUT

Anglers in the know flock to the Estes Park area for a chance to land one of four resident trout species—brown, brook, rainbow, and cutthroat. For excellent fly fishing with a side of solitude, hike to Thunder Lake from the national park's Wild Basin area, or fish roadside on the Big Thompson River, just east of the village.

3. SAMPLE THE TOWN'S BEST PIE

Nothing caps off a day in the wild like a plate of sweet, fruity goodness. And nobody does it better than Estes Park Pie Shop, which dishes up award-winning, overstuffed slices of triple berry, apple ginger peach, caramel apple pecan, and peanut butter (among many other flavors). youneedpie.blogspot.com

4. GET A GLIMPSE OF THE WILD

Estes Park and Rocky are known for their wildlife—large groups of elk are often seen sauntering right through town. From the village to the park you can also spot bighorn sheep, coyotes, bears, and, if you're lucky, moose. Increase your chances by heading out in the early morning or cruising for wildlife in the evening hours.

5. BECOME A PARK EXPERT

Join the Rocky Mountain Conservancy's special year of classes and events in 2015. There's something for everyone: guided wildflower hikes, campfire history tales, photography workshops, survival skills seminars, and much more. Check the schedule: RMConservancy.org.

6. SLEEP UNDER THE STARS

Camping options range from the fairly civilized (try one of 14 developed campgrounds in Estes Park or Rocky) to the undeniably wild. For the ambitious: Try "The Big Loop," a 3- to 5-day, 26-mile trek from Bear Lake to Grand Lake and back around. This incredible journey will take you through all three major ecological zones of the park: montane, subalpine, and alpine tundra.

7. TRY AN AUTHENTIC COLORADO CRAFT BEVERAGE

Colorado has a solid reputation for craft beer, but don't stop there. Estes Park has three brewery tasting rooms for post-adventure suds, and also offers a local winery, a distillery tasting room, and the largest whiskey selection in Colorado, including many Colorado-made bottles, at the historic Stanley Hotel.

8. DINE WITH THE LOCALS

After a long day of playing in the mountains, Estes locals head one place to kick back: Ed's Cantina. The lively restaurant serves up fresh Mexican plates (try the 14er, a huge burrito stuffed with steak, chorizo, and bacon) and robust margaritas. After a drink or two, you'll fit right in.

9. GET INTO THE BACKCOUNTRY

Don't have backcountry campsite reservations? Head to the Backcountry Office first thing in the morning to try your luck with available permits. Hikers can get a true wilderness experience, whether 2 or 12 miles in, by securing a site away from civilization.

10. WALK THE ALPINE TUNDRA

Our favorite route across this unique ecosystem: Park at Milner Pass and hike the 4.5-mile Mt. Ida Trail, which almost immediately emerges above treeline. Here, the trail gives way to more difficult terrain, so be mindful of the route. The trek offers excellent wildlife-spotting opportunities (look for elk, marmots, and golden eagles) on the way to the 12,889-foot summit, which treats hikers to huge vistas across the park.



MEN'S
BALTORO & DEVA

WOMEN'S

- Ultra-comfort Response A3 Suspension
- Color-matched raincover
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- Customizable lower back support
- WeatherShield electronics hipbelt pocket
- Front U-zip access to main compartment

FIT FOR THE TRAIL
gregorypacks.com



PACKS

The Drawing Board

It's not just a saying for gear designers. It's where concepts meet materials, and a new generation of equipment emerges by the stitch, scissor, and pencil. Get a glimpse inside the process, then check out the finished products in each category.

Backstory

The most expensive component—by far—of the Six Moons Designs Fusion (page 46) is the black stretch fabric on the front and side pockets, a durable, 95 percent nylon, 5 percent spandex blend from a company that makes NFL jerseys.

PHOTO BY ANDREW BYDLON



[BARGAIN]
Kelty Capture 25

Why we like it **You get sweet features with a sweet price to match.**

► **Packbag** With the Capture, Kelty designers prove that even the simplest features can be improved. Case in point: They reinvented the water bottle pocket. The zip-top, slim-profile packbag has a slick, tunnel-like bottle pocket nestled behind the lower back. We found it easy to access while wearing the pack, and we loved how the weight of the water stays centered on your lower back. More upgrades: The wider-than-average shoulder straps evenly distribute weight across the torso and provide a platform for two palm-size mesh pockets, which gave us instant access to snacks and energy gels. A tri-fold nylon case (included) attaches to the shoulder strap to secure a cell phone or point-and-shoot camera; pop it off and use the case to prop up your device for selfies or group shots. A stretchy shove-it pocket on the outer packbag is perfect for stashing a shell, puffy, or helmet. Ding: The main packbag has a mesh organizer panel, which we like, but its three vertical sleeves are too narrow for anything wider than an energy bar.

► **Durability** The 300-denier polyester is already on the beefy side for backpacks, and this fabric has diagonal threads that increase tear strength. After more than 50 dayhikes covering 290 miles (with loads up to 18 pounds), the packbag shows zero wear and tear.

► \$80; 1 lb. 8 oz.; 25 liters; kelty.com

+ FIELD TIPS

Pack smart. To achieve the best balance and load transfer, place heavy, dense items like water, fuel, and food close to your spine and centered in the pack.

[ALPINIST'S CHOICE]
Salomon S-Lab X Alp 20

Why we like it **An innovative backpanel zipper allows for super-speedy access.**

► **Packbag** For climbers, access isn't just about convenience: When you're high on a rock face, you can't afford to drop your headlamp or water bottle, and there's often no room to set down your pack and burrow for something. This pack makes gear-grabbing quick and easy for people in precarious situations, like when one tester needed a jacket while on an icy ledge on the Papillion Arête in France. "It took me eight seconds flat to grab a shell from the belly of the pack, and then I was climbing on," he says. Here's how it works: Slip off the shoulder straps (keep the hipbelt fastened), rotate the pack in front of you, tilt the top forward to expose the 20-inch-long zipper on the backpanel, and open it up to reveal the contents.

► **Comfort** Two thick, curved pads run from shoulder straps to the hipbelt wings, straddling the spine. The thin, low-profile cushioning, combined with the mega-wide shoulder straps (4 inches at the shoulders) and hipbelt (5 inches wide at the hipbone), supports 20-pound loads without adding bulk or weight.

► **Stability** The X Alp lacks compression straps, but we didn't miss them: The clean, low-profile shape hugs the back with no shifting or flapping.

► **Storage** Cool feature: A stiffly padded oblong crampon pouch is hidden in the lumbar area. One end zips completely open for garage-door-style loading; on snowless hikes we used the protective pouch for camera gear and lunch.

► \$150; 1 lb. 2 oz.; 20 liters; salomon.com



Test stats Packs tested: 27 / Trail days: 1,475 / Heaviest load: 72 pounds / Most awkward load: 2 cases of beer and a box of wine

P A C K S

Design School

Get mega-load comfort, smart organization, and exceptional adjustability for the big and tall.



[FULLY-LOADED]

**Thule
Guidepost 65L**
\$330; 6 lbs.; 65 liters; thule.com

HYDRATION

The exterior 3-liter reservoir storage means easy access and no chance of leaking or condensation in the main packbag (the fabric is highly water-resistant).

ACCESS

The giant J-shaped zipper lets us peel back the entire front of the pack. A 9-inch storm collar extends upward in a V shape to make stuffing easier (a bear canister fits easily inside).

HIPBELT

The pillowy hipbelt (it comes in three sizes each for men and women) has a rigid internal frame for support and ample adjustment options. We achieved a perfect wrap and excellent load transfer. Bonus: Thule offers a hipbelt option for big folks: up to 51 inches.

HIPBELT POCKETS

The stretchy mesh hipbelt pockets are spacious, measuring a full 9 by 6 inches; they keep cameras, lip balm, hand sanitizer, and snacks at the ready. "I stuffed six mandarin oranges and two Clif bars in each pocket," one tester says.

WATERPROOFING

Designers built a 10-by-15-inch waterproof pocket—big enough for an iPad and then some—into the front of the pack.

SUPPORT

The aluminum framesheet and thick, plastic framesheet attach to the hipbelt via a pivoting joint and springy, steel wires that extend from the joint throughout the length of the hipbelt. We logged more than 200 miles with loads up to 60 pounds in the Cascades, Sierra Nevada, and Grand Canyon, and we can testify: It's effective. The packbag self-adjusts as you walk, and the wires add rigidity to the hipbelt, dispersing weight across the entire hip shelf. Downsides: Packs this big need maximum contact with your back to maintain good load control, which means poor ventilation. And all that hardware makes this one of the heaviest packs we've tried in years, with some testers calling it "overbuilt."

SIDE POCKETS

This hydration-friendly pack has two different side pockets; one opens vertically for easy access (it has a shock cord closure for added security); the other is tilted (to better hold bottles). "I didn't have to dislocate my shoulder to reach my Thermos," one tester says.

ADJUSTABLE SUSPENSION

The torso length adjusts (from 17 to a generous 23 inches) as you slide the shoulder straps up and down an aluminum stay. You can also micro-tune the width of the shoulder yoke to accommodate narrow or brawny frames: Each strap has three attachment points, each with an inch of play.



[WOMEN'S PICK]
Montane Habu 22

Why we like it **Smart design maximizes comfort for small and curvy figures.**

- **Fit** It can be hard for petite or narrow-shouldered hikers to find a shoulder harness that adequately supports a load without feeling bulky and overbuilt, but this women's pack nails it. Narrow shoulder straps allow free arm-swinging; the straps curve away from breasts so there's no rubbing or chafing. A 6-inch dart in the lower third of the straps allows them to flex vertically and wrap better around the breasts. And all five of our testers agree: The hipbelt's 9-inch-long, precurved pads (one on each side) provide exceptional wrap for hips.
- **Comfort** The Habu can handle big-day

loads up to 20 pounds, thanks to the ribbed foam backpanel and unusually padded hipbelt, which is 5 inches wide where it joins the pack.

► **Packbag** Two generous hipbelt pockets, two stretchy side pockets, an inside zippered pocket, and smaller lid pocket make organizing easy. Climbers loved the tool carry system, which has rubberized cord that conforms to the shape of axe handles, plus a handy pick sleeve that prevents teeth from snagging. Bummer: Though the system is ideal for ice axes, smaller circumference trekking poles are tough to secure.

► **Storage** The toplid closes via zipper (rather than traditional buckles), which doesn't permit overstuffing.

► \$124; 2 lbs.; 22 liters; montane.co.uk

[MOST VERSATILE]
Columbia Trail Pursuit 30L

Why we like it **Get one pack for hiking, biking, climbing, skiing, and traveling.**

- **Versatility** There's not a lot of fussy webbing or unnecessary tool attachments on this pack. The clean, functional design has universal features like a big, stretchy front panel that works equally well at holding a helmet, extra layers, climbing skins, or a couple of magazines.
- **Organization** With a dozen pockets throughout, the Pursuit is awesome for everything-in-its-place packers. We loved the two front pockets with opposing semicircle zippers (they provide bigger openings than straight ones). The lower pocket has a deep organizational panel with a mesh pouch big enough for a passport, wallet, and phone. Gripe: The shallow mesh side pockets are big enough for an extra layer, but bottles fall out.
- **Comfort** The suspension is beefy for a daypack; it easily handled 25-pound loads on a dozen hikes in New Hampshire's Franconia Notch State Park.
- \$119; 2 lbs. 2 oz.; 30 liters; columbia.com



INNOVATORS
MIKE
PFOTENHAUER
OSPREY PACKS

Mike Pfothenhauer has spent the last 40 years thinking about carrying comfort. He founded Osprey Packs in 1974, built the first packs out of his California garage and eventually moved his family to Vietnam in 2000 to more closely monitor the design and manufacturing process.

For years, he's been obsessed with ventilated

suspension systems—specifically, building one that doesn't sacrifice stability or support. "Traditional packs rely on framework, plastic sheeting, and lots of foam padding to support heavy loads," he says. "These materials are heavy, lacking in ventilation, and tend to focus the load transfer to finite zones of the body—the hips and shoulders—

which creates painful pressure points." To reduce weight and boost comfort, Pfothenhauer started experimenting with high-tension, non-stretch mesh and three-dimensional geometry to allow airflow around the lumbar area and hips (not just the back). After building more than 60 prototypes, Pfothenhauer oversaw the

complicated manufacturing and development of new tools for quality testing (because nothing quite like this had ever been seen on the factory floor). The end result: the AG (short for anti-gravity) system, which is unlike any pack we've ever carried.

Read about Osprey's Atmos AG and Aura AG on page 26.

Know your torso length Pack sizing depends on the length of your spine (not your height). Learn how to measure yours at backpacker.com/torso.



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THE RAIN STOPS HERE

Photo: Rich Crowder



[ULTRALIGHT] Granite Gear Virga 26

Why we like it **This 1-pound pack is tougher than most ultralights.**

► **Durability** What good is a featherweight pack if it falls apart? During a 13-mile round-trip climb of Oregon's Mt. Washington, we challenged the abrasion resistance of the materials (100-denier nylon on the body with thicker, 210-denier nylon in high-wear points like the bottom and back). "The steep descent was gnarly so I found myself scooching down rocky sections," says one tester. "Lesser packs would have shredded."

► **Packbag** Weight savings come from a simple, stripped-down design. The narrow, single-compartment bag has a roll-top closure and a rope strap that lets you pile on extra gear. Six narrow (¼-inch) straps lock the load tight against the spine. We liked the small, stretchy mesh pouches on the shoulder straps—perfect for sunblock and lip balm.

► **Comfort** Densely padded foam shoulder straps provide adequate support for up to 20 pounds, but anything heavier overwhelms the frameless packbag and inch-wide webbing hipbelt, which merely stabilizes the load. Ding: It's hot. The pack's spooning fit against the back limits airflow.

► \$120; 1 lb.; 26 liters; granitegear.com

[WET-WEATHER CHAMP] Mountain Hardwear Scrambler 30 OutDry

Why we like it **Get superior waterproofing without a rain cover.**

► **Protection** Like it or not, some day you're going to hike in a storm. Rain covers work fine (many packs include them), but they add weight while hindering access (plus they can blow off in strong wind or get ripped by trailside branches). Mountain Hardwear's solution is far more elegant: Waterproof OutDry laminate (it attaches directly to the inner surface of the pack and seals both the fabric and the seams) transforms the Scrambler from standard to storm-proof. Plus, it adds killer durability to the already-rugged, 400-denier nylon. Over 100 days of testing in the Pacific Northwest, we never worried about our extra clothes getting wet even in all-day rain. (It's immune to storms but not submersible.)

► **Features** The minimalist pack has just enough organization. The toplid pocket holds sunglasses and a hat; two side pockets accommodate water bottles; and a padded, exterior-access sleeve is perfect for a hydration system or a laptop.

► **Comfort** The flexible, accordion-style framesheet conforms to your spine while remaining torsionally stiff, providing structure and support for up to 25 pounds. It also breathes well, thanks to all those horizontal air channels. Gripe: We wished for load-lifter straps to help pull heavy loads up and closer to the back.

► \$130; 1 lb. 11 oz.; 30 liters;
mountainhardwear.com



On the Web
Scroll through scores of pack reviews on your phone or tablet at gearfinder.com.



[DAYPACK-PLUS] High Sierra Lightning 35

Why we like it **Superior external storage allows this big daypack to carry minimalist weekend loads.**

► **Extra cargo** Think of it like a small, economical car with a monster roof rack for storage: A big, stretch-mesh pouch on the front and bungee lashing on the lid gave us a place to secure a sleeping pad and tarp (respectively) during a wet, two-day hike on California's Lost Coast Trail. We like the detachable shoulder strap pocket (perfect for a smartphone or small camera), multiple daisy-chain attachment options, and spacious hipbelt pockets.

► **Suspension** The wire perimeter frame and light, plastic framesheet attach to a stiff, padded hipbelt with a pivot joint, which kept 25-pound loads stable over tricky terrain. Tradeoff: The well-padded suspension let us carry big loads but makes the Lightning a bit heavy for the capacity.

► **Fit** It's ideal for medium and short torsos (less than 19 inches). "Finally a pack that doesn't bump the back of my head when I look up!" says a tester with a 15-inch torso.

► \$120; 3 lbs. 7 oz.; 35 liters; highsierra.com

Be realistic Don't buy a pack bigger than you actually need "just in case." You'll end up filling it with unnecessary stuff, increasing weight.



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No. 1 in specialty RV insurance from 2013 Millward Brown national survey data.

[INNOVATIVE ACCESS]

Millet Venom 40

Why we like it **Neat freaks can keep this pack squeaky clean.**

► **Toplid** The fixed toplid opens unconventionally from back to front. This orientation lets you plop the weekend-size pack front-side down on the ground—keeping the foam-and-mesh backpanel and shoulder straps free of dirt, rocks, and moisture—while still being able to access the packbag's contents. (It also means the front of the pack is smooth and free of webbing or buckles.)

► **Suspension** The aluminum, stay-supported framesheet, lightly padded hipbelt, and dense foam shoulder straps support loads up to 30 pounds.

► **Pole carry** Quickly stash trekking poles (on the side, without removing the pack) with two strategically placed shock cords: one on the shoulder strap and the other on the bottom of the pack.

► **Airflow** In addition to geometric cutouts on the shoulder straps, the molded backpanel has a ventilation chimney along the spine. "The channel and cutouts let in cool breezes, but the lumbar padding still gets sweaty on hotter days," says one tester who carried it for nearly two weeks in Thailand and Vietnam.

► \$160; 2 lbs. 5 oz.; 40 liters; millet.fr



TRENDING SMART POCKETS

Living out of a backpack for days on end has challenges. One is staying organized and keeping your valuable stuff protected from the elements. The current boom in gadgets has sparked designers to rethink organizing and protecting gear. "The consumer wants pockets that are item-specific—tablet, laptop, smartphone, goggle pouch—in a pack that still has a streamlined, simplified look," says Jayson Yagi, JanSport Senior Product Developer.

Look for external pockets for electronics and technical tools, like the detachable iPhone/camera sleeve on the Kelty Capture 25 (page 34). Inside pockets provide better solutions for storing sharp or delicate items like crampons and cameras (see the Salomon S-Lab X Alp 20 on page 34 and The North Face Cobra on page 44). The Thule Guidepost 65 (page 35) sports a waterproof front pouch that fits an iPad; Gregory's Baltoro (page 28) has a seam-sealed, waterproof hip-belt pocket.

"These purpose-designed compartments allow you to keep your electronics close at hand on the trail but not worry about rain showers or setting your pack down in mud or dust," says John Sears, Director of Product Development at Gregory.

[FOUR-SEASON]

Vaude Simony 40+8

Why we like it **This pack deftly handles a huge variety of trips—from gear-intensive dayhikes to winter overnights. And it fits almost everybody.**

► **Versatility** It's unusual to get winter features in a pack that's light and ventilated enough for summer. Durable, A-frame ski straps, secure Velcro and rubber tool attachments, and a dedicated crampon pouch make this pack winter-ready. Yet an easily removable lid (saves 5.2 ounces) and ventilation channels on the backpanel make it a solid pick for light-and-fast, warm-weather trips, too.

► **Adjustability** The Simony fits torsos from 15 to 19 inches, making it best for hikers with short- and medium-length torsos. Just pull cords that move a ratchet along notched plastic stays. Gripe: We found the cords tricky to grasp (especially while wearing gloves).

► **Suspension** The hipbelt attaches to the frame via a wide Velcro patch (remove it to save 5.5 ounces). Load transfer (up to 40 pounds) is very effective, but we found the pack sweaty on hot, hard trail days.

► **Access** We could find anything in seconds, thanks to two crescent-shaped zippers running up both sides of the narrow, top-loading packbag.

► \$190; 3 lbs. 1 oz.; 40+8 liters; libertymountain.com



Check side pockets When pack shopping, bring your favorite water bottle. Does it fit? Can you reach it without help? Bend over. Does it stay put?



THE EVOLUTION OF TRAIL RUNNING



Equipped with full ECCO BIOM Natural Motion capabilities, this trail runner combines a natural running feel with grippy outsoles and rugged construction. Kevlar-integrated uppers provide an athletic glove-like fit, while granting outstanding protection on the trail. Designed for both responsiveness and durability, this shoe will make running trails a natural pleasure.

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P A C K S

Head to Head

Both of these packs provide multiday capacity, adjustable suspensions, and good organization. Which one is right for you?



Lowe Alpine Zephyr 55:65

\$240; 4 lbs. 1 oz.; 55+10 liters;
lowealpine.com



Bergans of Norway Trollhetta 55

\$299; 4 lbs. 13 oz.; 55 liters;
bergans.com

BEST FOR

Mountaineers and backpackers who want a low-profile, big-load hauler with on-the-fly adjustability

BEST FOR

Those who want excellent stability and best-of-class shock absorption

ACCESS

A tunnel-like, 9-inch spindrift collar and single 21-inch, crescent-shaped, waterproof side zipper provide access to most of the packbag, but side compression straps block the zipper, making this pack more difficult to live out of than the Bergans. Bonus: The collar adds an extra 10 liters of space.

Get into this top-loader through the gaping mouth or the front panel that opens via a U-shaped zipper. On a weeklong backpacking and climbing trip to Red Rock Canyon, Nevada, we found it easy to load and unload bulky stuff like ropes, racks, and tent. Bonus: Side compression straps don't interfere with the panel zipper.

TOPLID

The lid is removable, but you need to unthread straps on three buckles.

The two-pocket lid detaches via two quick-release buckles (shed it to save 4.3 ounces). Gripe: We wished the straps were longer to accommodate overstuffing.

SUSPENSION

The wire perimeter stay surrounds a plastic framesheet and a perforated foam backpanel, which comfortably supported a 55-pound load on a four-day trek in Jasper National Park, Canada. Two testers preferred the pronounced lumbar pad to the flatter one on the Bergans.

A double helix-shaped spring steel stay attaches to the nylon framesheet and dampens the up-and-down movement of the load; it's especially noticeable on downhills. It also offers exceptional torsional flexibility, which translates to stability. "A 45-pound load generally makes me weave on log crossings, but not with this pack," one tester says.

FIT

You can micro-adjust the torso while wearing the pack. Cords on either side of the lumbar pad let you move the shoulder harness up or down 5 inches. "I could get the pack close for climbing, then settle the weight on my hips for the straightaways," one tester says.

An 8-inch, horizontal stay threads through two channels for easy torso adjustment from 15.5 to 21.5 inches. Bonus: Load-lifter straps have four attachment options to correspond with the torso length. The result: Near-custom fit and superior weight transfer.

VENTILATION

On a 2,500-foot ascent in Banff, we discovered that the dime-size perforations in the backpanel and shoulder straps are effective at venting. Our backs stayed even cooler and drier than with the Bergans under similar conditions.

Wicking mesh covers the scapula and lumbar pads; between them a palm-size, mini trampoline enhances airflow.



PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON; STYLING BY EMILY CHOI

mont·bell

Light & Fast



#2 23°F (EN TESTED)

Compressed: Ø5.9x11.7in

1lb. 8oz.



Down Hugger® 900

Keep your trail gear nimble



Details for Down Hugger

Super Spiral-Stretch System By orienting the fabric's warp and weft threads at 45 degrees to most major seam lines the sleeping bag becomes more fluid or elastic in nature. Additionally, to create an even more comfortable system we utilize an elastic stitch technique to create small "gathers" in the quilting. By combining the strategic seam orientation and the elasticized gathers we offer unrivaled fit and comfort.

900 Fill Power Goose Down Fill power refers to the volume in cubic inches that 1 ounce of down will displace. All other things being equal (fabric, construction method, and fill amount), a product made with high fill power down (900) is lighter and more compressible than an equally warm one made with lower quality down (550).



Photo: HagePhoto

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[ECO-FRIENDLY ARMOR] Fjällräven Kaipak 58

Why we like it The ultradurable packbag fabric has eco cred with no tradeoffs.

- **Fabric** Good for the environment: a pack made with recycled content. Great for the environment: a pack made with recycled content and so tough it'll last a lifetime. Fjällräven's G-1000 HeavyDuty Eco does the trick. The blend of recycled polyester and organic cotton wears like elephant hide—we couldn't mar it with normal use. The fabric is waxed for water resistance (it's PFC-free, another green star), but you'll still want to use the included rain cover in a downpour. The fitted cover slipped on securely when we got caught in thunderstorms in Colorado's Indian Peaks.
- **Comfort** The stiff suspension and well-padded hipbelt easily managed 45 pounds. "It hugged my back and the lumbar pad felt like it was glued in place," said one tester after a 10-mile day in the Rockies. Note: The fixed suspension is great for stability, but with no adjustment you'll want to check fit carefully (it comes in three sizes, as well as smaller capacities).
- **Organization** Thumbs-up for simple, top-loading design, but we wish it had a divider panel between the sleeping bag and main compartment.
- **\$300; 4 lbs. 6 oz.; 58 liters; fjallraven.us**

[MOUNTAINEER'S CHOICE] The North Face Cobra 60

Why we like it Haul a full pack into basecamp, then strip it and cinch it down into a summit pack.

- **Versatility** We loaded the Cobra with 55 pounds of bulky gear and hoofed it 12 miles to a basecamp in Colorado's Weminuche Wilderness. Then we peeled off the lid, hipbelt, and framesheet (slashing the pack's weight nearly in half—by a pound and a half), stuffed it with a few extra layers, lunch, and a camera, and cinched it down to a sliver of its former size via five compression straps. Then we headed out to bag 14,059-foot Sunlight Peak. The pack's narrow silhouette didn't get in the way while scrambling.
- **Alpine-ready** It's optimized for mountain tools with a rhino-tough crampon pouch, a removable helmet sling, secure ice axe loops, and reinforced pick and wand pockets. The bomber, 420-denier nylon packbag with reinforced bottom will take years of serious mountain abuse.
- **Bummer** We found the lightly padded hipbelt and flexible framesheet too light for big loads over multiple days of high-mileage backpacking; we got sore after about a day.
- **\$250; 3 lbs. 11 oz.; 60 liters; thenorthface.com**



[EDITORS' CHOICE] Osprey Atmos AG/Aura AG

- **\$230-\$260; 4 lbs. 6 oz.; ospreypacks.com**
Read the full review on page 26.

+ FIELD TIPS

Readjust on the trail. Fit your pack at home but refine it as you hike. Experiment with hipbelt, shoulder, and load lifter straps to find your comfort zone as weight settles and terrain changes.

TRENDING CUSTOM FIT

Packs, like shoes, require proper fit. But several factors can get between you and the right size. First, most packs have traditionally been small, medium, and large (at best), and you may fall somewhere in between. And even when pack companies make multiple components (hipbelts and shoulder straps), stores might lack stocking space or trained employees to fit them.

The solution: built-in adjustability. More companies are incorporating hipbelt, torso-length, and yoke-width adjustability directly into packs, so people can get a decent fit in the store, then dial it in at home or on the trail. Plus, companies are discovering lighter, less obtrusive ways to enable customization. "We incorporated a ratcheting technique from our bike carriers," says Graham Jackson, Thule's technical pack general manager. "It's easy, durable, and offers torso adjustment while the pack is loaded and on the back."

The downsides to adjustability? Moving parts can reduce stability and introduce weak points, and the extreme ends of the range can be awkward for smaller hikers. As always, load it up and try it out.

Check the pockets Are you a minimalist or an organizer? Think about how you like to store your gear and find the layout to match.



LIGHTNING 35

TITAN 65

HAWK 50



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High Sierra Tech 2 Series internal frame packs combine the very best in functionality, materials and adjustability to get you through any trail bound adventure. Tech 2 Series is available in a wide variety of sizes, fit and colors. **High Sierra. Adventure this way.**

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P A C K S

multiday

[ULTRALIGHT]

Six Moon Designs Fusion 65

Why we like it **It's rare to find a pack this large that's so light and supportive.**

► **Suspension** Packs with this weight-to-capacity ratio usually compromise on suspension. Who needs big-load support, the theory goes, if you're going to be carrying an ultralight load? Well, sometimes even ultralighters need to carry extra, whether it's water for a dry stretch or luxe gear for an occasional basecamping trip. Luckily, the Fusion saves weight through its economical, simple feature set, rather than with a wimpy suspension system. A single vertical stay and narrow plastic framesheet mimic the back's movement (allowing for more torsional rotation than a wide framesheet). And, unlike the skimpy hipbelts found on many ultralight packs, the Fusion's does an excellent job of distributing weight. We found it comfortable with up to 55 pounds.

► **Durability** It's surprisingly tough for a pack this light, thanks to 210-denier nylon and heavier reinforcements on the bottom. Sharp basalt and jagged juniper in the eastern Oregon desert didn't faze it.

► **Fit** Two shoulder strap/yoke options and three hipbelt sizes let hikers dial in the fit when they buy. We could fine-tune torso length on the trail (up to 9 inches) via a wide Velcro swath.

► \$230; 2 lbs. 7 oz.; 65 liters; sixmoondesigns.com



[EDITORS' CHOICE GOLD]

Gregory Baltoro/Deva

► \$299-\$349; 5 lbs. 7 oz.
(Deva 70, S); gregorypacks.com
Read the full review on page 28.



PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON

LEKI

MICRO VARIO CARBON (Actual Size)

Packs down to 15.5" • Extends 44-52"

LEKI



**[EASY ACCESS]
Exped Thunder 70**

Why we like it This cavernous pack keeps everything at your fingertips.

► **Access** Finding gear in a pack this big can often be a dump-and-dig affair. But the Thunder—with its yawning, top-loading mouth—is all about access. Two parallel, 17-inch zippers (connected at the top by Velcro) let you peel open the entire front of the pack, which came in handy on gear-intensive trips up Mt. Rainier and Mt. Shasta. The extendable lid has two zippered pouches, each big enough for a puffy or big lunch (or shed the lid to save 8 ounces). Two hipbelt pockets hold a phone or snacks.

► **Suspension** The light-but-effective suspension system managed a 45-plus-pound load on a Mt. Rainier climb (our tester carried the whole load up and over the summit on the Kautz Route), thanks to a single vertical aluminum stay and a shoulder-spanning horizontal bar to support the plastic framesheet. Load lifters attach the dense foam shoulder straps directly to the crossbar frame (rather than the top of the framesheet like most packs), allowing for excellent load balance. We found the dual-density foam hipbelt extremely comfortable: A softer inner layer molds to the pelvis while the firm outer layer provides structure for stability and load distribution.

► **\$289; 3 lbs. 8 oz.; 70 liters; exped.com**

We Test on Humans

Thanks to the crew who tested packs and the rest of the gear in this issue.

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FOOTWEAR

Backstory

Salewa's Alp Flow Mid GTX (page 64) has a multipiece sole package including Gore-Tex Surround technology (page 62). From left: the Vibram outsole, a PU midsole, a thin poly/nylon membrane, a honeycombed poly/nylon spacer, and a perforated PU footbed.

PHOTO BY ANDREW BYDLON

F O O T W E A R

trail runners

[SMOOTH AND STABLE] Pearl Izumi EM Trail N2

Why we like it Like Goldilocks would have said: The cushion is just right.

► **Cushion** If you want more cushioning than the PureGrit, but not as much as the Hoka, this middle-way approach is for you. The EM Trail provides padding, but not so much that it interferes with ground sensitivity. When a California tester's form deteriorated near the end of a 20-mile run, the firm EVA midsole saved the day. "The shoe absorbed heel strikes when I got sloppy, but still felt responsive," he says.

► **Stability** The flared outsole and deep heel cup provide a stable platform, which turned out to be key for one tester who was surprised by a lightning storm a mile away from his car. "I ran like a maniac on wet, steep, downhill singletrack without losing my footing or rolling an ankle," he says.

► **Comfort** A supportive arch, cushy ankle padding, and breathable mesh upper made



M's: smaller toebox, shorter than average; W's: slightly narrow toebox, shorter than average

for a comfortable ride on long, hot runs. And the seamless interior meant zero hotspots over 150 miles of use.

► \$120; 1 lb. 4 oz.; m's 7-14, w's 5-12; pearlizumi.com



+ New Fitting Tool! We partnered with ShoeFitr (shoefitr.com) to digitally analyze a shoe's internal shape. See below for fit key.



[CHAMELEON] Brooks Running PureGrit 3

Why we like it The midsole adapts to hard and soft footstrikes.

► **Performance** A shoe that reacts the same way all the time is great for treadmills, but you run outside, where conditions change. The PureGrit's flexible, 14mm EVA midsole changes right along with the hard and soft surfaces, the fast and slow gaits. How? Its cushioning comes from a proprietary material that adapts its density with every footstrike, becoming firmer with harder footstrikes (like running fast, or on concrete) and cushier on softer footstrikes (like running slowly, or on dirt trails). The rounded heel creates a natural, rolling gait. One ultrarunner loved the feel during a 22-mile training run over a combo of granite and dirt singletrack in Northern California, noting that they felt firm and responsive early in the run, and soft and cushioned later, when he slowed down.



M's: average all around; W's: narrow front of toebox

► **Breathability** The open mesh upper releases excess moisture and heat, even during long, super-hot runs (we used them up to 105°F). Plus, they dried in about 15 minutes after creek crossings.

► **Durability** The upper is bolstered with a laminate on high-wear areas.

► **Traction** Hexagonal lugs provide solid grip on all kinds of terrain (including loose rock descents), but they're too shallow to provide much traction in mud.

► \$120; 1 lb. 4 oz.; m's 7-14, w's 5-12; brooksrunning.com



[CUSH KING] Hoka One One Mafate Speed

Why we like it It swallows bumps on rough trails and saves your joints on long runs.

► **Cushion** This shoe's proposition: If padding is good, can you ever have too much? Hoka's thick EVA midsole (it's 35mm at the heel and 31 at the toe) makes up almost a third of the shoe's height and provides massive cushioning—especially welcome for tender knees, heavier runners, and ban-zai downhillers. Despite the sole's thickness, the shoes are light on the feet, thanks to a super-soft, open-cell foam that adds padding with scant weight (think of it as a durable kitchen sponge). Even those of us with cranky joints routinely crushed 15 miles on hard-packed trails without issue when wearing the Hokas.



M's: average all around; W's: loose toebox, runs large

► **Protection** The fat sole felt like monster truck tires on runs in California's Trinity Alps Wilderness. The soft outsole wraps around obstructions and stabilizes the foot on uneven terrain while buffering from rock bruising underneath.

► **Response** We expected a sole this fat would make for a heavier, less responsive shoe, but the Mafate's rockered (curved) sole and springy rebound helped us maintain a fast stride.

► \$170; 1 lb. 6 oz.; m's 7-15, w's 5-11; hokaoneone.com

PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON (LEFT); ANDREW BYDLON (RIGHT)

The test Miles hiked: 10,500 / Hottest temp: 116°F (Redding, CA) / Coldest temp: -5°F (Sierra Nevadas) / Longest day: 50 miles (Sierra Nevadas)

F O O T W E A R

Head to Head

These trail runners are both about speed, but one has killer response while the other favors cushioning and support.



La Sportiva Bushido

\$125; 1 lb. 5 oz.; m's 38-47.5, w's 36-43; lasportiva.com

The 13mm-thick EVA midsole material doesn't have much cushion for hard-packed trail or pavement, but that didn't bother testers who prefer a responsive, stiff feel underfoot.

Frixion rubber (the same stuff La Sportiva uses in climbing shoes) in the center of the outsole stuck to every surface we encountered, including steep granite slabs in California's Castle Crags State Park. The widely spaced, arrow-shaped lugs kept us from slipping in soft dirt and mud.

A plastic arch bridges the gap between forefoot and heel, with a split in the center that acts as a hinge point. The result is increased flexibility (you can actually fold this shoe in half) and better ground feel, but less support under the forefoot.

The upper is fortified with a substantial toecap and a protective TPU plate in the heel. We sprinted down debris-covered trails without worrying about banging rocks.

BEST FOR

Runners who favor a minimalist feel and goat-like grip for moving fast over rough terrain



M's: slightly narrow toebox, shorter than average; W's: narrow toebox, runs small



CUSHION

TRACTION

SUPPORT



PROTECTION



Dynafit Panthera

\$140; 1 lb. 8 oz.; m's 6-12, w's 3-9; dynafit.com

A layer of blown rubber, which is lighter and more flexible than traditional rubber, tops the full-length EVA midsole, making the shoe soft underfoot. We could go all-out on hard-packed trails.

The Vibram outsole gripped wet rocks and braked well in loose dirt, but the narrow, rectangular lugs slipped in mud.

A hard plastic shank runs from the middle of the arch to just below the toes, creating a stiff, supportive platform.

A dual-density midsole is softer facing the foot and firmer toward the outsole. That, combined with the plastic forefoot plate, gave us plenty of protection on the nastiest trails in California's Trinity Alps.



M's: average all around; W's: average all around

BEST FOR

Runners who prefer cushioning and protection for long mountain runs

FOOTWEAR

trail runners



[DURABLE BARGAIN]

Under Armour SpeedForm XC

Why we like it It's the lightest, toughest, and least expensive trail-running shoe here.

► **Durability** The SpeedForm's low weight, thin upper, and barely there midsole make it feel like a minimalist shoe, but its unique upper (a single piece of synthetic material) gives it excellent abrasion resistance. After more than 150 miles in these shoes, we see no wear or deterioration in the cushioning of the full-length foam midsole.

► **Breathability** The upper material, with its pinhole perforations, isn't as breathable as open mesh, but it provided effective ventilation on 75°F trail runs. The upper's tight weave also repelled water during a spring downpour, despite the lack of a waterproof membrane. "It took about 5 miles in a steady rain to soak these through," our tester says.

► **Traction** The lugs are sticky enough to let us really fly downhill without losing control. But because they're low-profile and closely

spaced, they don't grip dirt during lateral moves, so we felt less secure turning on a dime on switchbacks.

► **Sockless comfort** The upper's soft interior material and welded and taped seams mean no hotspots.

► \$100; 1 lb. 1 oz.; m's 7.5-16, w's 6-11; underarmour.com



M's: snug in toebox, runs small; W's: tight toebox, runs small

+ FIELD TIPS

Sopping wet runners? Open laces wide, stuff with newspaper, and be patient. Don't use direct heat.

[MOST VERSATILE]

The North Face Ultra Cardiac

Why we like it It's our one-shoe solution for trail and road running.

► **Support** If trails are only part of your itinerary, get this versatile shoe. A plastic insert wraps around the heel cup, providing a firm platform and heel protection for hard surfaces, while the single-density midsole supplies enough cushioning for long runs. After a 20-mile run (18 road miles and only 2 on trail), one ultrarunner said, "The Cardiac has just enough cushion to take the sting out of running on concrete, yet it doesn't sacrifice responsiveness on rocky trails."

► **Breathability** The mesh upper kept our feet cool and dry during hot runs. It dries fast, too: Our feet were dry within a half-mile of a creek crossing in 80°F temps.

► **Traction** Multi-directional lugs bite into dirt

and rock, but they're low-profile enough that they don't feel like cleats on pavement.

► **Comfort** The forefoot mesh gives way to a soft, cushioned tongue and ankle cuff. "My feet swell on long runs, and the padding kept the laces from digging into the tops of my feet," says one tester. Gripe: Toe protection is minimal.

► \$110; 1 lb. 3 oz.; m's 7-14, w's 5-11; thenorthface.com



M's: tighter than average toebox, runs small; W's: tight toebox, runs small



INNOVATORS
JEAN-LUC
DIARD
CO-FOUNDER OF
HOKA ONE ONE

In 2009, when footwear was trending toward minimalism with barely-there soles, Jean-Luc Diard and Nicolò Mermoud developed shoes that went the opposite direction: super-fat soles. After realizing that almost half of all runners (both trail and road) had reported some injury in the previous year, Diard says, "We thought we could make

running a more pleasant sport overall." The pair started developing a larger, softer midsole to cushion and protect runners' joints. Hoka One One footwear is immediately recognizable by its thick midsole (like in the Mafate Speed, page 52), and what was once a head scratcher is now a trend: Other companies have embraced max

cushion as well. "It was visible in the races this year," Diard says. "The standard level of protection has increased significantly. Most runners have about 10mm more cushioning than they did a few years ago."

What's next for Hoka One One? Diard sees the trend expanding from running to the hiking and work world. "Shoemakers

are realizing that they can build a lightweight shoe with lots of protection," he says. This spring, Hoka releases the Tor Ultra Hi WP hiking boot, which combines the soft, thick midsole with a supportive, ankle-height upper. "It's a complete combination of a running shoe and a hiking boot," Diard says. Our first test samples are due in soon.

Shop late Try on boots at the end of the day when your feet are slightly swollen, like they will be after a day of hiking.

PURSUE PERFECTION

Born in the Canadian Coast Mountain wilderness, Arc'teryx is built on the principle of obsessive, precise design and production. Our in-house manufacturing and design centres allow us to evolve and build products the right way.



ARC'TERYX

DESIGN | CRAFTSMANSHIP | PERFORMANCE



[MOST BREATHABLE]

Merrell Capra Sport Low

Why we like it Ventilated mesh uppers make these ideal for hot weather.

► **Breathability** A lot of hikers buy waterproof shoes “just in case.” But that strategy can backfire in summer because a waterproof membrane can lead to sweaty feet, and sweaty feet can lead to blisters. Our dogs never overheated in the Capra, even on 100°F hikes in Nevada’s Sierra Buttes, thanks to a nonwaterproof, airy-weave mesh upper.

► **Support** The well-cushioned heel tapers down to lighter cushioning in the toes, giving the Capras a soft, comfortable stride. We thought of them as a pair of running shoes with a boot sole. But don’t overdo the weight: On a 32-mile hike to Nevada’s Paradise Lakes, a 52-pound pack proved too much for the Capra’s EVA midsole. “My feet were screaming by the end,” our tester says. “These are best with loads under 40 pounds.”

► **Traction** The Vibram Megagrip outsole features a tacky compound that makes the entire sole ideal for scrambling. We felt goat-like in all sorts of terrain, including wet rocks and slimy roots on coastal hikes in Maui. The only time we noticed slipping? On steep gravel or scree, most likely due to the shallow lugs.

► **Break-In** The soles start out laterally stiff and take some breaking in to loosen up. Wear them for a day or two around the house before longer hikes.

► \$130; 1 lb. 13 oz.; m’s 7-15, w’s 5-11; merrell.com

M’s: average all around; W’s: slightly loose toebox, runs a bit large



[BEST ALL-AROUND]

adidas Outdoor Terrex Scope High GTX

Why we like it Get a winning combination: sticky Stealth rubber underfoot with a durable, protective upper on top.

► **Traction** Really good sticky rubber is not easy to make. Fortunately for adidas designers, they didn’t have to start from scratch: They just borrowed Stealth rubber from sister company Five Ten. Stealth has long been one of our faves because it sticks like glue on every surface, including wet rock. The Scope High’s L-shaped lugs bite into soft, mucky terrain, and they’re spaced widely enough to shed mud.

► **Durability** Thick, high rubber rands on the toes and heels act like battle armor. After 120 miles of hard hiking in Alaska’s ruthless backcountry, our samples show hardly a mark and the soles still look (almost) new.

► **Comfort** Straight from the box to a 10-mile hike up Alaska’s notoriously steep and switchback-free Mt. McGinnis: not a single hotspot.

► **Support** The polyurethane midsole absorbs shock—consider these best for loads below 40 pounds—and provides a bit of torsional stiffness. The high ankle kept us stable while sidehilling and scrambling over scree fields.

► \$200; 2 lbs. 5 oz.; m’s 7.5-14; adidas.com



[HYBRID]

Columbia Conspiracy III

Why we like it It’s a light hiker and a trail runner in one.

► **Versatility** Can one shoe really offer stiff support for hiking and springiness for running? Columbia’s proprietary blend of EVA in the midsole—it’s the stuff they use in their backpack straps, and stiffer than most other midsole foams—does both. That meant we could comfortably backpack in them (with up to 25 pounds) and then wear them on an 8-mile trail run, as one tester did in California’s Trinity Alps.

► **Protection** The Conspiracy’s sturdy midsole protects against underfoot rocks, but for the most rugged terrain we wished for a more ample rand around the toe and foot to protect against bangs.

► \$100; 1 lb. 4 oz.; m’s 7-15, w’s 5-12; columbia.com

Get measured Feet change over time. Each time you shop, determine your proper size with a Brannock device and a knowledgeable boot fitter.

get vertical.



360°
CLIMATE
CONTROL

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The Alp Flow GTX® featuring the innovative GORE-TEX® SURROUND™ product technology provides all mountain enthusiasts with a fully breathable and totally waterproof hiking shoe. SALEWA's own 3 Function System ensures ankle flexibility, lateral support and perfection in fit. The outstanding comfort of this shoe is finished off with ultra-soft nubuck leather and the market-leading grip of the Vibram® hike approach sole.

Engineered with:



salewa.com

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F O O T W E A R

light hikers and mid-duty



[MOST VERSATILE] Vasque Breeze 2.0 Low

Why we like it Torsional stiffness and superior support help this low-cut perform like a bigger boot.

- **Support** We love lightweight shoes—unless we have sore feet at day's end due to lack of support. The Breeze delivers better-than-expected support thanks to an EVA midsole that sits atop a curvy, hard-plastic plate. It rivals the arch support of an aftermarket insole and the stability of a mid-duty hiker. We wore it on hikes through the Adirondacks and found it plenty protective for rough terrain and supportive enough for loads up to 35 pounds.
- **Cushioning** The midsole combines stiffness with padding thanks to soft foam in the heel and stiffer

foam throughout the rest of the shoe.

- **Mobility** Though it has the support of a higher-cut boot, the Breeze's low cut makes it agile enough for light scrambling.



M's: slightly tighter
toebox, runs smaller
than average

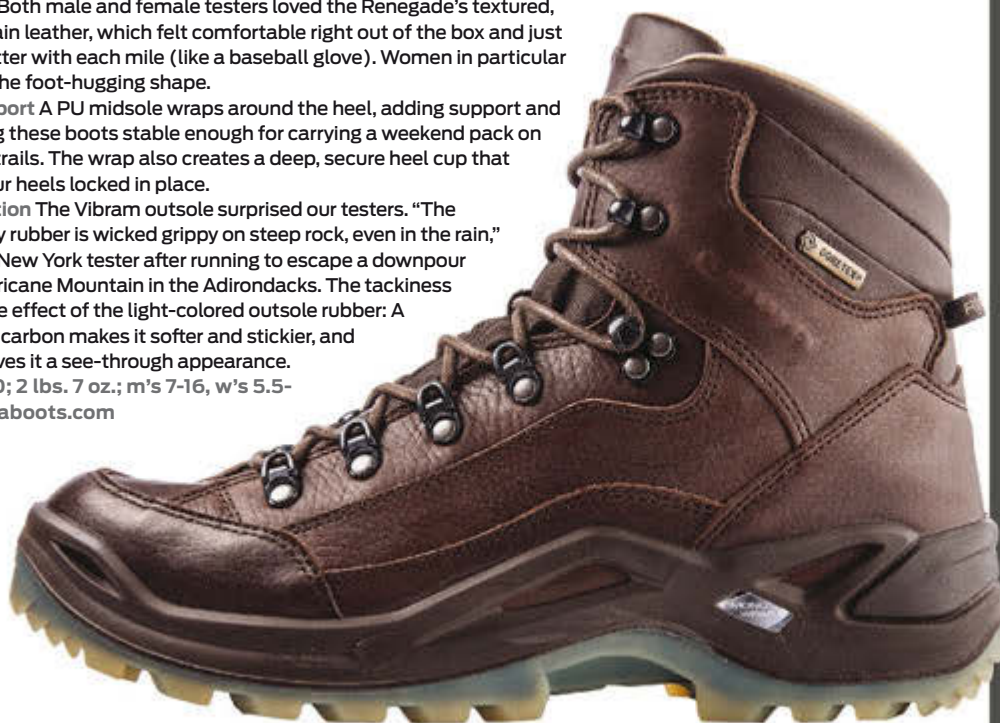
- **Ding** No rubber toe rand: After 150 miles, the toe leather shows significant scuffing.
- **\$130; 2 lbs.; m's 7-15, w's 6-11, wide and narrow sizes; vasque.com**

mid-duty

[LUXE COMFORT] LOWA Renegade Deluxe GTX Mid

Why we like it The premium leather upper molds to your foot.

- **Comfort** Leather uppers can have a rough break-in period, but not these. Both male and female testers loved the Renegade's textured, full-grain leather, which felt comfortable right out of the box and just got better with each mile (like a baseball glove). Women in particular loved the foot-hugging shape.
- **Support** A PU midsole wraps around the heel, adding support and making these boots stable enough for carrying a weekend pack on rough trails. The wrap also creates a deep, secure heel cup that kept our heels locked in place.
- **Traction** The Vibram outsole surprised our testers. "The gummy rubber is wicked grippy on steep rock, even in the rain," says a New York tester after running to escape a downpour on Hurricane Mountain in the Adirondacks. The tackiness is a side effect of the light-colored outsole rubber: A lack of carbon makes it softer and stickier, and also gives it a see-through appearance.
- **\$260; 2 lbs. 7 oz.; m's 7-16, w's 5.5-11; lowaboost.com**



+ FIELD TIPS

Gaiter up Pair lowcuts with stretchy "spats" to keep out debris (backpacker.com/bargaingaiters).

TRENDING STICKY RUBBER

You don't have to be a climber to want climbing-shoe traction. To give hikers and trail runners superior grip, more footwear companies are starting to use sticky rubber on all types of outdoor footwear.

Climbing-shoe rubber is soft, which makes it more grippy on hard surfaces, but also less durable than conventional hiking-boot rubber. Some bootmakers are starting to harness the benefits of both types by blending climbing rubber with more durable compounds or by putting tougher rubber in high-wear areas (see La Sportiva's Bushido, page 53). adidas Outdoor has been using Five Ten's Stealth rubber on many of its hiking, running, and water shoes, including the Terrex Scope High GTX (page 56). And Merrell is using Vibram's new Megagrip rubber (a blend designed for grip on wet terrain) on its Capra Sport Low (page 56).

The result? Shoes with better traction on wet surfaces and slabby rock, and hikers with a new sense of confidence in their stride.

Bring your socks Some are thin, some are thick, and they can affect fit. Bring your favorites to the store when shopping.



True to the Trail



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BRIDGER MID **Bdry** | WOMEN'S RED RED

Obōz is designed in Bozeman, Montana by a small group of avid outdoor types for hikers, runners, backpackers and anyone else who savors the trail.

F O O T W E A R

Design School

We all know that layering systems are the way to go for protecting your body through a variety of conditions. Why not your feet, too?



[A BOOT FOR ALL SEASONS]

Arc'teryx Bora 2 Mid

\$320; 2 lbs. 8 oz. (regular liner);
m's 6.5-12.5; arcteryx.com

U P P E R

A single piece of polyurethane-coated nylon bolstered by two layers of thick TPU film creates a durable, water-resistant outer shell. Laminated construction eliminates seams (which add weight and can be weak points), and the upper's nylon threads are dipped in polyurethane, increasing abrasion resistance. After a 100-mile, on- and off-trail hike in the Sierras, the uppers were unscathed. Gripe: Most of us found the boot hot.

C O L D - W E A T H E R L I N E R

This insert (with Gore-Tex liner) boasts EVA insulation and a higher cut. We stayed warm during an unexpected Sierra snowstorm when temps dropped below 30°F. Bonus: Both liners have reinforced soles so they can double as camp shoes.

L A Y E R I N G

The Bora 2 Mid consists of a hard, weather-resistant outer shell (or upper) and interchangeable midlayers (liners) that you adjust according to conditions, which means you don't need to clog your closet with multiple pairs of boots.

F I T

We found them best for low- to mid-volume feet.

R E G U L A R L I N E R

Use this one for warmer climates. The lightweight, snug-fitting Gore-Tex bootie conforms to the foot like neoprene. We like the elastic cuff, which kept debris from entering the top of the boot and kept our feet dry during quick river crossings that just barely submerged the boot.

O U T S O L E

The Vibram outsole has a flat toe edge for climbing and sidehilling. "I appreciated the sharp heel brake and robust toe bumper when intermittent lightning during a ridgeline hike at Utah's Snowbird forced us to book it down the wet, rocky mountainside," a tester says.

D O W N S I D E S

Testers reported snow getting stuck between the layers, and some found the liners slipped around within the shell.

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YEAR-ROUND COMFORT



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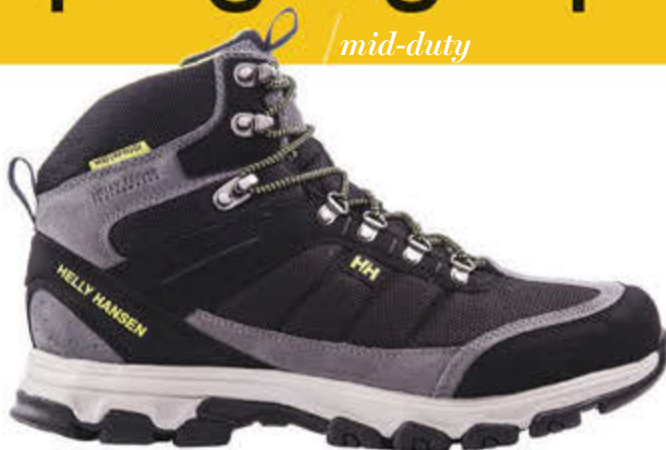
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/mid-duty



[SWEET DEAL]

Helly Hansen Rapide Mid Mesh HT

Why we like it **Get a whole lotta boot for the money.**

► **Durability** The suede-and-fabric upper provides a unique combination of strength and flexibility; we never felt like we were sacrificing comfort for toughness. The upper's double stitching is bolstered by rubber caps on the toe and heel, which helped protect the boot during a five-hour scramble up a scree field in Washington's North Cascades National Park. "We boot-skied our way down from the Golden Horn," our tester says. "They were scratched to hell, but the scree would have totally shredded a lesser pair of boots." How does Helly get to such a reasonable price? Simple: They use their own proprietary waterproof membrane and outsole.

► **Comfort** The mixed-material upper and flexible forefoot have an immediately soft, broken-in feel. We took them right from the box on a 15-mile hike in Lake Tahoe with a 25-pound pack. The slightly rockered toe and soft footbed gave the boot a cushy feel that's rare in mid-duty boots.

► **Support** A hard, plastic stabilizer in the arch provides torsional stiffness without restricting flexibility in the forefoot, and, along with the EVA midsole, gave us enough support to handle a 40-pound pack over 30 miles in the Cascades.

► \$130; 2 lbs. 5 oz.; m's 7-13, w's 5.5-10; hellyhansen.com



M's: slightly narrow
toebox, runs small

[MOST DURABLE]

Five Ten Camp Four

Why we like it **A high, wraparound rand is tank-tough.**

► **Protection** The rubber outsole is both sticky and durable (a rarity), and extends half-way up the toe before giving way to a slightly thinner rubber rand, which adds toughness for little weight. The rubber rand wraps 360 degrees around the boot, protecting both the double- and triple-stitched leather and your foot from every angle.

► **Support** The firm EVA midsole and PU shank give the Camp Four enough support to handle 50-pound packs. And the ankle cuff, which is reinforced by an extra layer of leather on the front and a high rubber rand on the back, enabled one tester, recovering from a sprained ankle, to wear them comfortably on an 8-mile hike to the summit of Washington's Mt. Si.

► **Traction** Five Ten's Stealth S1 rubber outsole sticks to every surface, wet or dry. One tester scrambled up a 5.1 granite slab in Lake Tahoe with a 25-pound pack and stuck like a gecko to the rock. And because the rubber extends up the instep, we also enjoyed impressive traction during scrambling, log-crossing, and muddy-root clambering.

► \$150; 1 lb. 12 oz.; m's 6-14, w's 5-11; fiveten.com



M's: narrow, tighter
toebox, runs small

[EDITORS' CHOICE]

La Sportiva Synthesis Mid GTX

► \$180; 1 lb. 5 oz.; m's 38-47.5, w's 36-43; sportiva.com
Read the full review on page 13.



TRENDING GORE-TEX SURROUND

Your feet have a quarter of a million sweat glands, which is why boot makers are always looking for better ways to vent moisture through their leather and fabric uppers. The latest innovation? Gore-Tex's Surround technology.

Waterproof boots have long been criticized for causing sweaty feet: Gore's membrane is indisputably waterproof, but many feel it lacks sufficient breathability. That's because in order for the membrane to actually start to let sweat vapor escape, a certain level of heat has to build up inside the boot to create a temperature differential that drives the movement. Surround technology creates an active way to start pumping out heat (sweat vapor) faster and more efficiently—through the bottom of the foot. The key is a spacer in the sole and vents along the upper's sidewalls. With each step, the foot compresses the spacer, which then pumps air out through the one-way vents (heat goes out, but moisture can't come in).

A number of boot companies have jumped on board, including Marmot, Salewa, Scarpa, Hanwag, Zamberlan, and TrekSta. We've tested several iterations of this new tech and found its most successful implementation in La Sportiva's Synthesis Mid GTX, (page 13), which is one of the most breathable waterproof hikers on the market.

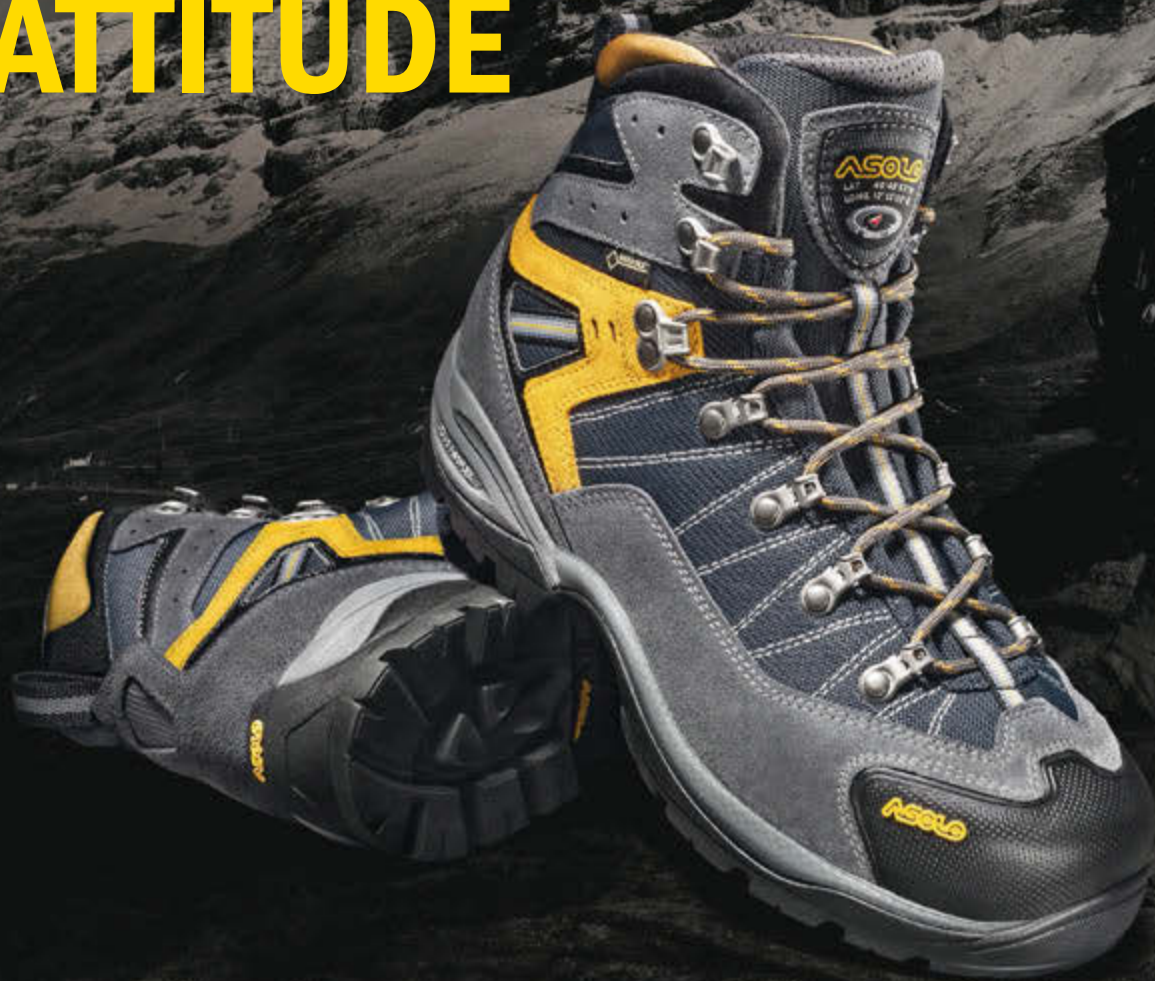


Find a slope Check boot fit on an incline board (most good stores have them). Be sure your toes don't bump the front of the boot while hiking down.

The ASOLO logo is rendered in a bold, yellow, stylized font. The letters are thick and blocky, with a distinctive circular element at the end of the 'O'. The background of the entire advertisement is a black and white photograph of a rugged, rocky mountain landscape. In the foreground, a pair of ASOLO Matrix 2.0 hiking boots is prominently displayed. The boots are dark grey with yellow accents on the laces and side panels. One boot is standing upright, showing its side profile, while the other is lying on its side in front of it, revealing the tread pattern of the sole. In the background, a hiker with a large backpack is seen from behind, walking up a rocky trail towards a mountain peak under a clear sky.

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matrix
2.0

As a result of years of experience building hiking and backpacking footwear and thru research by ASOLO, we introduce the new Matrix 2.0 range. Utilizing a new technology, Duo Asoflex midsole designed by Asolo development it represents two elements fused together for increased comfort and performance. This new range of products defines a higher quality standard of performance, comfort, style and durability. Designed and manufactured specifically for men and women to deal with the different types of outdoor activities, trekking, backpacking and hiking.

FOOTWEAR

mid-duty and heavy-duty

+ FIELD TIPS

Creative lacing. You can alleviate a lot of fit problems with different lacing techniques. Learn how at backpacker.com/perfectlace.



[BEST FOR LONG-HAUL HIKING]

Salewa Alp Flow Mid GTX

Why we like it The miraculously universal fit means killer comfort over long miles.

► **Fit/Comfort** We put these boots on fat feet, skinny feet, and everything in between, and everyone said the same thing: "Like a glove." The reasons? To-the-toe lacing lets us adjust volume as needed throughout the foot, the roomy toebox (way roomier than other Salewa's we've tested) gave everyone plenty of wiggle room, and a special adaptive foam in the heel pocket conforms to all ankles and absorbs any excess space that can cause friction. Several of us stopped toting camp shoes because they seemed like dead weight when we had these on our feet. (Full disclosure: One tester out of 7 inexplicably got a heel blister.)

► **Support** The soft EVA midsole is buttressed by a hard plastic insert that adds torsional stiffness. We carried packs weighing up to 50 pounds while sidehilling and off-trail hiking in the Sierra, and we never felt shaky.

► **Breathability** The Alp Flow Mid uses Gore's new Surround tech (page 62), but we were split on its success in this boot. The upper uses leather and lots of rubber, which may inhibit ventilation.

► **Durability** Hundreds of miles of hiking didn't put a dent in them. One tester even rubbed the boot for 15 minutes on sharp limestone to see if he could rip off the rubber exoskeleton. No dice.

► \$240; 2 lbs. 10 oz.; m's 7-13, w's 6-11; salewa.us



M's: roomy toebox;
W's: very roomy toe-
box; both run large



[FAST AND LIGHT]

Salomon S-Lab X Alp Carbon GTX

Why we like it It's the first ever low-cut mountaineering boot.

► **Protection** If you like to backpack in trail runners, then you'll love climbing mountains in these. An integrated, padded Lycra gaiter over the low-cut synthetic and Gore-Tex upper creates an impenetrable barrier against snow, rock, and water. A rigid midsole shields against sharp rocks and provides a stiff platform for universal crampons. A 1.3mm-thick synthetic upper and Gore-Tex membrane (there's no insulation) kept us warm down to 5°F in California's White Mountains. What you don't get: ankle support and protection.

► **Support** We pushed these boots on mixed terrain from Alaska to Chamonix, lugging packs up to 50 pounds. They delivered. The midsole includes a stiff, carbon-fiber chassis that's torsionally rigid, yet flexible at the forefoot for comfortable walking. The secret: horizontal cuts in the middle of the frame, which encourage flex when the sole is weighted, yet maintain stability while edging.

► **Durability** These boots are tank-tough, thanks to a rubber rand and thin, flexible TPU reinforcements.

► **Weight** They're crazy light—and comfy—for mountaineering boots.

► \$300; 2 lbs. 2 oz.; m's 4-12; salomon.com



reinforcements.

► **Weight** They're crazy light—and comfy—for mountaineering boots.

► \$300; 2 lbs. 2 oz.; m's 4-12; salomon.com



COMING SOON SHOE POWER ENERGY-GENERATING INSOLES SOON MIGHT CHARGE YOUR PHONE.

Every year, there are new ways to keep your gadgets alive in the backcountry. Battery

packs, solar, hydrogen, hand cranks, and heat-powered chargers have all emerged as viable options (see backpacker.com/power for some of our favorites). Now comes a charging solution made for hikers: foot power.

Originally developed by mechanical engineering design students at Carnegie

Mellon University (their Kickstarter campaign raised \$60,000), SolePower Ensoles have a generator in the heel that creates electricity every time you take a step. A waterproof battery stores the energy in a pouch that attaches the top of the shoe with Velcro. The 1500 or 1800mAh battery will charge your device via

USB cable. The company estimates that one hour of hiking will yield 2.5 hours of talk time. Hikers are becoming more and more power-hungry each year, and innovations like this are a step (ahem) in the right direction. Look for SolePower Ensoles to hit the market in fall 2015. Learn more at solepowertech.com.

Try different brands Manufacturers use different shaped lasts (foot molds), which affect the shoe's internal shape; find the one that best fits your foot.



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F O O T W E A R

heavy-duty



[BEST SUPPORT] Hanwag Cengalo GTX

Why we like it **Unrivaled support and precision lacing kept our feet and ankles happy on long, all-season tours above treeline.**

► **Support** We walked confidently over frozen, icy terrain with 50-plus pounds on board. Even when we did slip, the 8.5-inch-high cuff kept our ankles from rolling.

► **Fit** The Cengalo laces up in two separate zones (there's a locking lace midfoot). This let us dial in a snug fit in the forefoot for mixed climbing and separately crank down on the heel for a support boost while moving over uneven terrain. We wore them out of the box on a 7-mile round-trip attempt up Colorado's 14,439-foot Mt. Elbert and had hotspots, but no blisters.

► **Traction** The Cengalo excels equally at climbing up high and striding to get there. Deep lugs in the Vibram soles easily shed slush, snow, and deep mud, providing confidence and grip both up and down iffy slopes. A climbing zone at the toe let us push up on rock flakes no thicker than three stacked quarters on class 3 scrambles in Colorado's Front Range. The midsole, made of EVA and polyurethane, proved plenty rigid for sidehilling without unduly taxing our ankles.

► **Protection** The 2.5-inch rubber rand shields the boot from sharp rocks and crampon points.

► **\$360; 3 lbs. 4 oz.; m's 6.5-12; hanwag.com**



M's: Slightly narrow toebox, average elsewhere

PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON

TRAILHEAD

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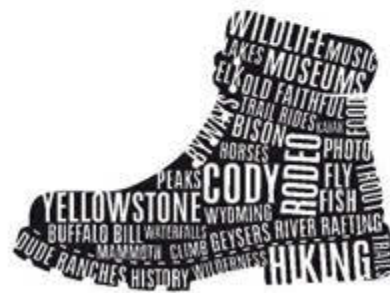


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[ALPINE EXPERT]

La Sportiva LS Trango Cube GTX

Why we like it The Trango is stiff enough for ice climbing, yet nimble enough for long mountain approaches.

► **Versatility** Not many boots we test can accomplish so many tasks so well like this update to an already-cherished shoe. A combination of materials (polyurethane under the toe, shock-absorbing EVA under the foot, sturdy TPU inserts) makes a stiff-yet-shock-absorbing mid-sole that's at home on high-mileage mountain trips with heavy loads. And the heel welt makes the boots compatible with semi-automatic and universal crampons.

► **Outsole** The chunky lugs and smooth ridge on the inside toe edge let us move with confidence on tiny edges, slippery surfaces, and shifty talus fields on the Loft Route on Colorado's Longs Peak.

► **Protection** A lightweight, flexible plastic coating runs up the sidewalls and around the heel to provide structural support and enhance durability. The TPU heel inserts protected against jagged rocks when we hiked around Colorado's Holy Cross Wilderness.

► \$375; 3 lbs. 4 oz.; Euro 37-48; sportiva.com

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Dancing in the moonlight in Indian Basin,
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Award Winning mtnGLO™ Tent Light Technology

*patent pending

- Built-in LED lights
- Lightweight, flexible & durable
- Switch-on ambient light

USB compatible controller with
on, off and 50% brightness settings



TENTS

Backstory

The first step in NEMO's design process: building a full-scale model made of poles, string, and masking tape.

That allows designers to climb in and move around. With the Blaze 1P (page 70), they settled on a design that uses a single long, arched pole.



PHOTO BY ANDREW BYDLON



[MOST VERSATILE]

MSR FlyLite

Why we like it This twofer is a castle for one and an ultralight shelter for two.

► **Livability** This sub-2-pounder is a legit option for couples who want a wicked-light shelter for moderate conditions. The 29-square-foot floor is a standard two-person size, and the 44-inch peak height offers plenty of headroom. But it lacks a vestibule, so in extended rain it works best as a solo shelter, as you'll need to store gear inside. Sleeping alone with a pack and boots

stashed next to him, our tester called the space "lavish."

► **Setup** How do you get so much space for so little weight? The FlyLite uses two trekking poles in lieu of tent poles for supporting the head end (a 24-inch aluminum pole, included, props up the foot end). And it's a surprisingly uncomplicated pitch for a trekking-pole shelter: Simply position the pole's grip into the awning above the front door, extend the pole until the fabric is taut, then repeat on the other corner. "I had this

tent up in 30 seconds on my first try," reports one tester.

► **Ventilation** Like most single-wall shelters, airflow is a weakness. We experienced drippy condensation in most conditions, but in mild temps we minimized moisture by unzipping the top of the door.

► **Weather protection** It withstood 40-mph winds along New York's Finger Lakes Trail, though some wind-blown rain penetrated the foot-end mesh.

► \$350; 1 lb. 9 oz.; msrgear.com



[LIGHT AND ROOMY]

NEMO Equipment Blaze 1P

Why we like it Solo tents sometimes feel coffin-tight, but this nonfreestanding, double-wall dome is supremely livable.

► **Comfort** In order to get to a weight solo hikers will carry—less than 2 pounds—most double-wall solo tents sacrifice space, meaning low ceilings or cramped interiors.

The Blaze bucks the trend by using ultralight fabrics and an innovative design that requires only a single arched pole from end to end. Result: The large side door provides contortion-free access, and the 40-inch peak height let our 6-footer sit up comfortably. The 84-inch floor fit his extra-long sleeping pad with room to spare, and the extra floor space along the

+ FIELD TIPS

Minimize condensation. On double-wall tents, keep the rainfly well tensioned (use the guyout loops) to increase space between the tent canopy and fly and encourage air circulation.

sides (width is 30 inches) let him store a headlamp and clothes alongside his bag.

► **Setup** The Blaze has a fussier pitch than some nonfreestanding tents. The single hubbed pole bows diagonally across the tent with a short brow pole that supports the walls. The design provides more end-to-end headroom than hoop-style shelters, but we had to run back and forth, adjusting the stakes (or rocks) to tension the opposite corners and remove wrinkles in the floor.

► **Vestibule** The 6-square-foot vesti provides ample space for a stove and boots, but storing a pack there blocks the door.

► **Weather protection** It proved stable and quiet in 30-mph gusts on New York's Finger Lakes Trail.

► **Durability** Though the Blaze held up well during testing, the 7-denier fabrics (10-denier on the floor) call for careful handling and site selection.

► \$370; 1 lb. 12 oz.; nemoequipment.com

T E N S E G R I T Y

Design School

This tent's innovative shape provides outstanding headroom and unobstructed views.



[SPACIOUS ULTRALIGHT]

Sierra Designs Tensegrity 2 FL

\$390; 2 lbs. 10 oz.;
sierradesigns.com

HEAD ROOM

Most tents are narrower at the ceiling than at the floor (consider the classic A-frame pup tent). But the Tensegrity actually broadens toward the 41-inch peak: At the head end, its ceiling is a whopping 57 inches wide compared to 50 inches at the floor. Though that floor space measures just 29 square feet (which is adequate, not generous, for two occupants), the outward-slanting walls create unprecedented headroom. "Better than some four-person tents I've used," one 6'2" tester says. The design also prevents water from dripping into open doors (the fly's edge extends 12 inches beyond the floor).

POLE STRUCTURE

The Tensegrity includes just one pole: A 48-inch aluminum arch that supports the tent's foot end. The dearth of dedicated poles (along with compressible fabrics) makes this shelter smaller than a basketball when packed. Setup requires a pair of adjustable-length trekking poles and seven stakes—and several practice runs before the process feels efficient. "I wouldn't say it ever became fast or easy, but we did get to the point where a two-person team could achieve a taut pitch in less than four minutes," says a tester.

UPGRADE

Campers who spare no expense when it comes to weight-savings can opt for the Tensegrity 2 Elite, which costs \$490 but weighs just 2 pounds, 2 ounces (it's made of ultralight silnylon, so you need to seal all seams).

FRONT-PORCH STORAGE

Instead of standard vestibules that store gear alongside the doors, the Tensegrity employs a separate "front porch" accessed through the tent's head end. The result? Blissfully uncluttered entrances and exits. Staking the awning's corners to the ground kept gear dry during rainstorms in Colorado's Zirkel Wilderness. In fairer weather, testers used a second set of trekking poles to prop up the edges and create a sunshade big enough to sit under (as pictured).

STABILITY

Achieving a taut pitch requires solid stakeouts. The 20-denier polyester fly doesn't sag when wet (as nylon does), so the pitch stays taut in soggy weather and keeps the big fabric panels from acting like sails. The design proved solid through howling wind and rain on the Appalachian Trail in Virginia, and gear stashed in the "front porch" stayed dry.

VENTILATION

A huge mesh panel at the head and two enormous mesh doors make for unobstructed views and an open-to-the-stars sleeping experience. "It feels open, like a tarp, but has the bug protection of a tent," a tester said after three nights in Colorado's Flat Tops Wilderness. Fabric panels zip over the doors' mesh to seal in warmth and keep out wind. And compared to other single-wall tents, ventilation is above average: No condensation accumulated on 30°F nights in California's John Muir Wilderness.

T E N T S

solo and two-person



[BIVY]

Brooks-Range Mountaineering Alpini Bivy

Why we like it **Pack ultralight—but legit—weather protection.**

► **Packed size** Stop hemming and hawing about whether to bring an emergency shelter. There's no debate with this 1-pound bivy. At the size of a 20-ounce bottle when stuffed, the Alpini takes up so little pack space that we never balked at carrying it on long dayhikes in New York's Adirondacks and Spain's Sierra Nevada.

► **Protection** The Alpini strikes a near-perfect balance between full-featured bivies and bare-bones space blankets. A mesh panel blocks bugs but allows airflow: No condensation accumulated on dry, 30°F

nights with the mesh panel open or even on a -9°F night with everything fully zipped. The waterproof/breathable nylon repels rain, but the water-resistant zipper won't seal out every drop in a deluge, so seek a sheltered spot in the worst weather. It also kept wind from drilling through our bags, a blessing on cold, breezy nights. But achieving full head protection means zipping the bivy closed, which feels close and (to some testers) claustrophobic.

► **Durability** The 40-denier nylon on the bottom proved rugged enough for hard use, and showed no scuffs or tears after a summer of testing.

► \$250; 1 lb.; brooks-range.com

two-person



[WINTER-READY]

Big Agnes Foidel Canyon 2

Why we like it **This sturdy, double-wall dome offers the protection and space campers need for year-round use—and the durability to do it year after year.**

► **Stormproofing** When a snowstorm and 30-mph gusts hammered Colorado's Indian Peaks Wilderness, we slept soundly, thanks to

a super-taut pitch and steep walls that shed snow and wind. Two crossing poles deliver time-tested stability, and the fly extends closer to the ground than most three-season models. "It's stout enough for anything in the Lower 48," one mountaineer says. Only the doors use mesh panels (they can be covered with nylon) so we stayed warm on subfreezing

fall nights above treeline in the Rockies.

► **Livability** Even our taller testers (6'2" and 6'6") enjoyed spacious quarters, thanks to the 43-inch peak height and 92-inch interior length. Two doors and two 10-square-foot vestibules shelter packs and climbing gear, though to ease exits, some of us preferred to store packs inside (the 34-square-foot floor is big enough for people and gear). And ventilation is excellent: Even on subfreezing nights, no condensation accumulated.

► **Setup** It's a cinch to pitch, even in the dark. Credit color-coded buckles, reflectors on the fly and canopy that highlight buckle points, and simple geometry (two preconnected crossing poles plus a brow segment).

► **Durability** Thirty-denier Dyneema fabric on the floor and fly make this tent tougher than most. Fifteen times stronger than steel, Dyneema withstands heat, cold, and UV rays better than nylon, so it maintains its strength over time. Downside? Dyneema's higher cost.

► \$650; 4 lbs. 6 oz.; bigagnes.com

Check the headroom Climb inside with the intended number of occupants. Imagine being holed up in a two-day storm. Enough space?



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sierradesigns.com

[LIGHTS INCLUDED]

Big Agnes Rattlesnake SL2 mtnGLO

Why we like it **This lightweight dome comes with built-in LED lighting.**

► **Illumination** Strings of lights line the canopy's seams at the head of the tent: Flip the switch and the lights come on, just like at home. "We loved the romantic ambiance during our honeymoon in Rocky Mountain National Park," reports one newlywed. Lights run on three AAA batteries or any USB-equipped battery pack and add negligible weight—which is why we gave the innovation our Editors' Choice Award (see page 18).

► **Livability** Thanks to all-mesh walls and two fly vents, the interior stayed

condensation-free on 28°F nights in the Sierras. And it feels roomier than you'd expect, given the smallish 27-square-foot floor. Credit the near-vertical walls, a 40-inch peak height, and broader dimensions at the head than the foot. Gear stows tidily in the two 9-square-foot vestibules.

► **Weather protection** Two days of hard rain in Colorado's San Luis Valley couldn't penetrate the Rattlesnake, thanks to its taut pitch and protective drip line (unzipping the vestibule doesn't divert water through the opened door onto the tent floor).

► \$350; 3 lbs. 9 oz.; bigagnes.com



[ULTRALIGHT BARGAIN]

Big Sky Soul x2

Why we like it **Shaving tent weight usually means jacking the price or shrinking the dimensions, but the Soul hits a rare trifecta—light, livable, and affordable.**

► **Setup** Given the weight, space, and price, we expected this tent to be nonfreestanding. Amazingly, no. It requires zero staking to be solid—right down to the vestibule, which attaches to the pole ends (rather than using stakes).

► **Livability** Short on storage pockets (there are two) but big on interior space, the Soul is a roomy retreat. The 42-inch peak height let testers sit up and change clothes comfortably, though tall campers (over 6'2") found the 85-inch length confining because sloping walls bump heads and feet. All-mesh walls limited condensation to the fly's underside: No moisture collected inside, even along California's rain-drenched Lost Coast.

► **Protection** Through heavy rain and coastal wind, the Soul kept us comfy and dry.

► **Durability** Here's the tradeoff for the Soul's impressive specs: The ultralight silnylon fabrics are more fragile than most. (General rule of thumb: Fabrics that are both light and strong are expensive.) Even with careful handling and site selection, the fly suffered a small tear on a weeklong trip.

► \$289; 2 lbs. 11 oz.; bigskyproducts.com

**INTERACTIVE EDITION**

For more product reviews and testing videos, download the Gear Guide at backpacker.com/ipad.

**TRENDING
WISPY
FABRICS**

A few years ago, most tents used 75-denier fabrics (ultralight models got away with 40-denier materials). But denier—an indicator of thread thickness—is decreasing. Forty denier is the new average, and lighter tents now use 10- and 15-denier fabrics. Are today's tents less durable? Not exactly, says NEMO's Tom Bath.

"Denier was never a foolproof measure of a fabric's durability," he says, "but it's even less significant now."

Newer, stronger nylons and weaves let manufacturers use thinner fibers while maintaining the fabric's resistance to rips and punctures. The trade-off is long-term waterproofness: Lower-denier

fabrics can't tolerate thick waterproof coatings as well as higher-denier materials. "Tear strength goes down as coating thickness goes up," says Bath. Whereas 40-denier fabrics remain tear-resistant under a 3,000mm coating, 15-denier fabrics become prone to rips unless they're coated with a thinner, 1,000mm

coating. "That's plenty initially," says Bath. "But over time, abrasion wears away the coating."

Bottom line: You still have to coddle low-denier fabrics a bit to prolong their water-resistance. And once you start to see fabric wetting out, treat it with a product like Nikwax Tent & Gear Proof (nikwax.com).

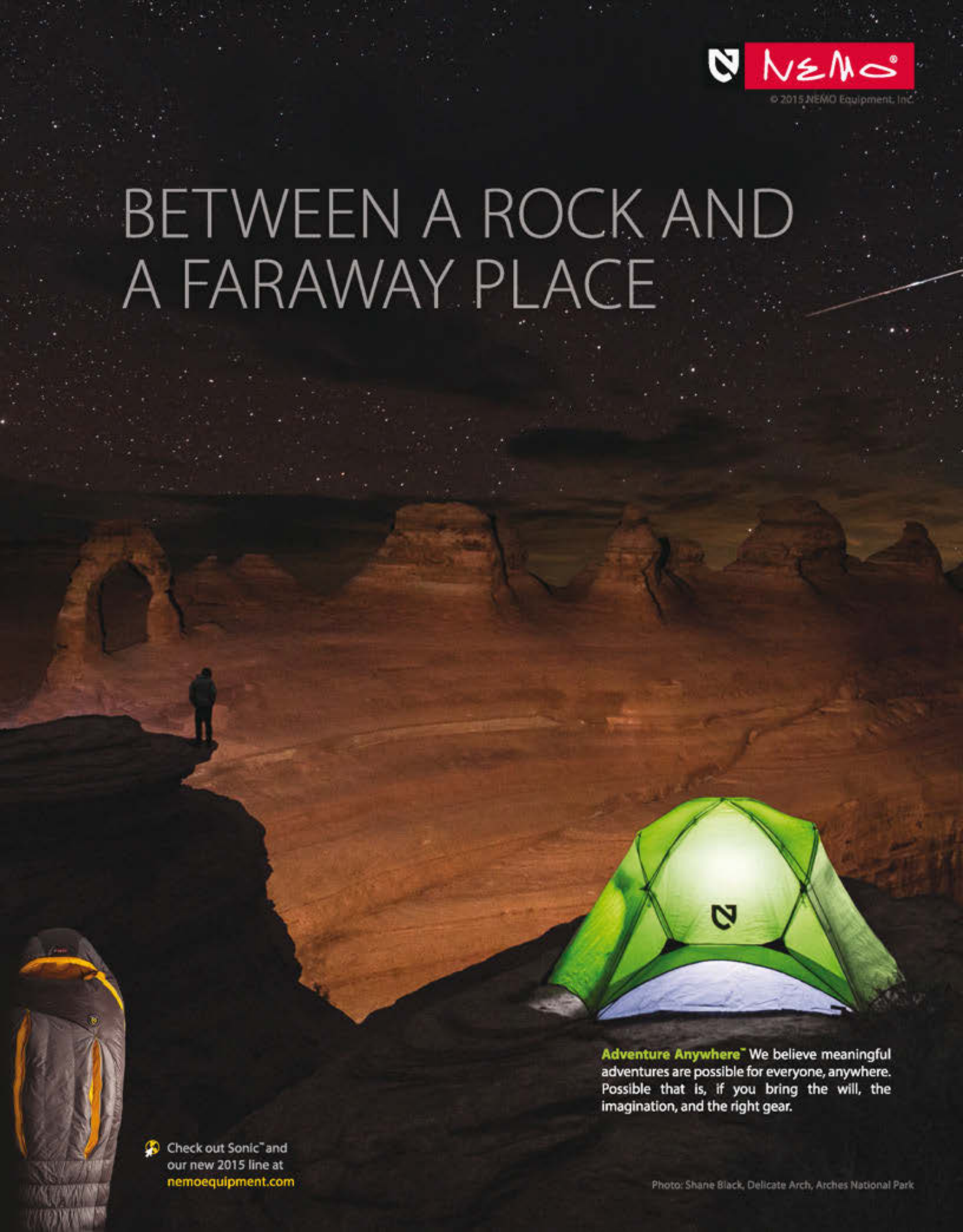
Storage wars Make sure the mix of vestibule and in-tent storage options matches your preferences.



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Photo: Shane Black, Delicate Arch, Arches National Park



[ROOMY BARGAIN] REI Half Dome 2

Why we like it We've long loved the livability (and affordability) of this iconic double-wall dome, which won our 2010 Editors' Choice Gold Award. This spring, a 10-ounce weight reduction and improved ventilation make a good thing even better.

► **Livability** This has always been the Half Dome's calling card. It's a roomy 32 square feet with steep, headroom-amplifying walls and a 40-inch peak height, which accommodates two XXL occupants. Four fly vents dissipate moisture: "All fabrics were dry after 30°F nights at 7,000 feet near Lake Tahoe, California," one tester says. And a new roll-away

option lets campers peel back the fly from the head and foot ends, increasing airflow and facilitating stargazing.

► **Packability** Weight and bulk used to be the penalty for the roomy interior. But lighter, more compressible fabrics make the new Half Dome reasonable on both counts.

► **Durability** The lightened-up fabrics are hardly fragile: 40- and 70-denier nylon stand up to kids, dogs, and abrasive campsites. But these fabrics have become cheaper over time as even lighter technologies hit the market. So no price hike.

► \$199; 4 lbs. 9 oz.; rei.com



[STURDY AND LIGHT] The North Face Triarch 2

Why we like it This freestanding shelter handles the rowdiest three-season storms, making it ideal for hikers who want maximum protection with minimum weight.

► **Strength** We rarely see such strong pole geometry in a tent this light. The stable configuration (with poles supporting all four corners and the ceiling) and taut pitch proved impressively solid in 35-mph winds in Utah's Dirty Devil canyon. Below 25 mph, the Triarch 2 offered quiet, flap-free

refuge—even when testers didn't bother to stake out auxiliary guylines. An effective drip line (using near-vertical side walls) keeps rain out when the door is open.

► **Livability** The 50-inch width and 43-inch peak height feel spacious for sub-6-footers (taller testers were limited by the sloping walls that compromise the 84-inch floor length). The triangular doors extend all the way to the brow pole, making getting in and out easier. Two 7-square-foot vestibules shelter boots, packs, and a compact kitchen while keeping the zipper within easy reach from inside.

► **Setup** A how-to diagram on the stuffsack makes for a no-fail pitch: Our tester did it for the first time, solo, in 20-mph winds.

► **Ventilation** "Airy in the warmest, muggiest weather," says a tester, crediting the all-mesh walls. Tradeoff: The mesh also admits wind-blown dust and sand.

► **Versatility** In fast-pitch mode—with just the fly and included footprint—the Triarch becomes a breezy sunshade. Caution: The fly's head and foot ends stop 14 inches from the ground, exposing fast-pitch sleepers to blowing dust and rain.

► \$350; 3 lbs. 6 oz.; thenorthface.com



INNOVATORS
MICHAEL
GLAVIN
SIERRA DESIGNS

THE SECRET TO TENTING ZEN? DITCH YOUR VESTIBULE.

Michael Glavin is waging a war against vestibules. These floorless storage spaces are now ubiquitous among three-season tents, but they were invented for mountaineers, to keep spindrift from gusting in through the tent door. "It's a good idea in winter, but for three-season use, vestibules don't perform very well," says Glavin, the company's vice president and brand manager. His objections: They make you open two zippers for each entrance or exit, their low clearance turns entrances into a crawl, gear stored there blocks the door, and they inhibit ventilation.

Consequently, none of Sierra Designs' tents includes traditional vestibules. Instead they feature awnings, which allow for safer cooking, unobstructed views, improved ventilation—even superior stability. "The real magic to making awnings work is using a partial rainfly, like the eaves on your house," Glavin says. Partial rainflies create "gear closets" that shelter stuff away from the doors. And the new trekking-pole-supported Tensegrity (page 71) impressed us with even more gear storage and interior headroom.

go were others fear to tread

FLINT



MUNICH



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Jambu
Adventure Designs

Head to Head

The similarities between this pair of lightweight, two-person tents end at the specs.



Marmot Force 2P

\$389; 2 lbs. 15 oz.;
marmot.com

Using poles that extend to all four corners, this freestanding structure pitches easily, anywhere.

Crawling in is a bit cumbersome. The doors are small and low.

The 29-square-foot floor is adequate, but the 38-inch peak height cramps even average-size occupants. "I couldn't sit up without hitting the ceiling, and it's really hard for two people to change clothes simultaneously without elbowing each other," reports one 5'9" tester.

The Force's fly prevents drips from entering, and its lower profile makes it even more immune to big winds. It proved rock-solid through 30-mph winds along Arizona's Grandview Trail.

Asymmetrical vestibules (6.8 and 3.5 square feet) fit boots and packs (in the larger one), though getting in and out with gear stored there was a battle.

The 30-denier ripstop nylon (40-denier for the floor) and 8.7- to 9.3mm poles stand up to abuse.

You get two mesh pockets in the corners and an overhead pocket where you can stash a headlamp-turned-lantern up high.

BEST FOR

Those who sleep better knowing their tent is a fuss-free fortress

POLE STRUCTURE

DOORS

INTERIOR SPACE

WEATHER PROTECTION

VESTIBULES

DURABILITY

POCKETS

PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON

T E N T S



Exped Mira II Hyperlite

\$379; 2 lbs. 14 oz.;
exped.com

The quasi-freestanding geometry uses one pole that arches end to end, a brow pole over the door, and an arched hoop at the head end that creates volume. True stability requires securely staking all four corners.

Wide, high doors allow for graceful entrances, and a convenient hook makes for quick, easy mesh tie-back.

We had plenty of room on the 30-square-foot floor to sit tall, stretch out, and even play cards. Not only is peak height unusually lofty (43 inches) but headroom throughout is also excellent, thanks to near-vertical walls.

The drip line prevents water from funneling inside, and when fully guyed, the tent barely budged in 25-mph winds on Arizona's Kaibab Plateau.

Two 7-square-foot vestibules let both occupants store packs and boots within easy reach, without compromising egress.

The 15-denier ripstop nylon (20-denier for the floor) and 8.5- to 9mm poles proved durable with judicious treatment and site selection.

Two mesh pockets at the head hold a phone and sunscreen.

BEST FOR

Campers willing to secure a few stakes and sacrifice some stability in exchange for roomier quarters

POLE STRUCTURE

DOORS

INTERIOR SPACE

WEATHER PROTECTION

VESTIBULES

DURABILITY

POCKETS



[SWEET DEAL] Marmot Tungsten 3P

Why we like it **Get freestanding convenience and luxe headroom at an affordable price.**

► **Livability** When you're stuck in a storm, ample headroom is the difference between a miserable case of claustrophobia and a rip-roaring tent party. And although the Tungsten's 41-square-foot floor just fits three sleeping pads, the lofty 46-inch-tall peak height—with curved poles that open up the corners and make that space more usable—means party central. Two asymmetrical vestibules (11 and 8 square feet) offer sufficient storage, but we wished for larger fly vents to help dissipate moisture. With two people and a large dog, we experienced

a fair amount of condensation after a 29°F night in Idaho's Sawtooths.

► **Protection** It takes a bit of finagling to tighten the fly, which sags on one side if the pitch isn't perfectly symmetrical. But once taut, the Tungsten barely budged in 30-mph winds in New York's Adirondacks. Fully unzipping the fly does let water drip into the tent; prevent it by stopping the zip a few inches short.

► **Durability** Sturdy, 68-denier polyester (40-denier in the canopy) requires no TLC, making the Tungsten ideal for family abuse.

► **Packability** The tradeoff for headroom and price? The Tungsten is heavy and bulky (27 by 9 inches) when packed.

► \$259; 5 lbs. 15 oz.; marmot.com



[RUGGED AND SPACIOUS] Mountainsmith Mountain Dome 3

Why we like it **Expansive headroom and an unusually sturdy design make this a comfy, affordable choice for car-camping and short-mileage overnights.**

► **Protection** "In heavy rain, ice, and snow, this tent is Fort Knox," said a tester after a wintry trip in Utah's Canyonlands National Park. The stout, three-pole geometry prevented any sagging beneath an inch of snow. The rainfly's drip line keeps water from creeping inside during wet exits.

► **Livability** The pole structure also creates voluminous interior space with walls that angle out past vertical. And the whopping 51-inch peak height

let testers put their pants on while standing up (albeit bent over). "Four people could sleep in here," our tester says of the 44-square-foot hexagonal floor, which measures an NBA-ready 105 inches long. Swaths of mesh and two fly vents eliminated condensation in the most challenging conditions.

► **Versatility** Using the included footprint, the Mountain Dome 3 converts to a tarp-like, fly-only shelter that's ideal for bug-free climates and weighs 5 pounds, 2 ounces.

► **Durability** Tough, 68-denier polyester throughout provides low-cost durability, but adds weight.

► \$270; 6 lbs. 8 oz.; mountainsmith.com

+ FIELD TIPS

Tent pole TLC. Don't snap your tent poles together; it creates nicks in the aluminum that can lead to splitting. Instead, carefully seat each section and check that they fit tightly together.



COMING SOON SELF-POWERED SHELTERS

Tents are getting into the energy business. Already, Big Agnes has introduced tents with electric lights and battery packs capable of charging your phone (page 18). But that's just the beginning, says Big Agnes cofounder Bill Gamber, who envisions tents that can heat occupants and power camp stoves. Gamber

gets ideas about innovative power sources from long-distance sailboats, remote villages, and his own off-the-grid residence. "The technology is already there in other industries," he says.

Such people demand better battery technology, which could trickle down to tents to improve communication and reduce

overall gear weight (by shrinking the amount of stove fuel you have to pack, for instance). So far, most tent/power collaborations involve solar energy: Eddie Bauer First Ascent and Goal Zero joined forces to make a solar panel-equipped tent, and, although no product was released, First Ascent continues to experiment

with solar-channeling tents. And textile manufacturers are promising to debut tent fabrics that can capture solar energy.

Other power sources may also merge with camping technology. "You need water when you're camping, so a lot of times you camp next to a fast-moving stream," Gamber says. "Could that charge your stuff?"

Pole attachments Sleeves offer better stability in rough weather; clips are lighter and easier to erect.



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T E N T S

three-person and group



[ULTRALIGHT]

NEMO Equipment Dagger 3P

Why we like it **Most shelters this light skimp on space or durability, but the Dagger saves weight with unusually strong, ultralight fabrics.**

► **Materials** The key to success here: innovative fabrics. The 20- and 30-denier nylon is more tear-resistant than most (a high thread count boosts strength), enabling NEMO to shave weight with only one drawback: price.

► **Livability** The spacious, 43-square-foot floor and 42-inch peak height create sufficient space for three adults, reports our tester after sharing it with two others in

Oregon's Eagle Cap Wilderness. Four pockets provide organization for all, and three packs easily fit inside the two 11-square-foot vestibules. Huge doors facilitate easy entry.

► **Ventilation** The all-mesh walls let moisture escape in most conditions, but there are no vents in the fly—so with three occupants on 34°F nights, condensation dampened our bags.

► **Protection** With poles that support all four corners as well as the crown, the Dagger proved stalwart in gusts up to 20 mph. Securing all guyouts made it sturdy in 35-mph wind.

► \$500; 3 lbs. 12 oz.; nemoequipment.com

Group



[ROOMY AND STABLE]

Exped Gemini IV

Why we like it **By pairing four expedition-worthy poles with three-season fabric, the Gemini delivers rock-solid stability for an attractive weight.**

► **Protection** It's sturdier than most three-season domes thanks to four identical-length poles that attach to the canopy via fabric sleeves. The Gemini proved unflappable in 25-mph winds in Banff National Park. "Through a total cloudburst lasting several hours, we stayed dry, as did everything stored in the two 11-square-foot vestibules," one tester reports. Light-but-strong fabrics keep weight low.

► **Livability** Testers raved about the spacious,

57-square-foot floor, which fit five sleepers (three teens and their parents). The 45-inch peak height let everyone sit up fully, and broad, teardrop-shaped doors facilitate easy exits. Six pockets (two overhead and one each in the corners) provide ample storage. And ventilation is excellent thanks to generous swaths of mesh and two fly vents. "We experienced zero condensation, even in 40°F temperatures and pouring rain," one tester says.

► **Durability** The 70-denier floor let testers forgo a groundcloth, and extra-fat, 12mm poles (9mm to 11mm is typical for three-season shelters) stand up to howling winds.

► \$649; 8 lbs. 8 oz.; exped.com

Check door size Can you enter and exit the tent without doing unplanned yoga?

PHOTOS BY (FROM TOP) COURTESY (2); BEN FULLERTON



[BASECAMP CASTLE]

Mountain Hardwear Optic 6

Why we like it **The six-person version of the 2014 Editors' Choice Award-winning Optic 2.5, this palace features a rollaway fly and adjoining doors for 180-degree views.**

► **Livability** With an 86-square-foot floor and 75-inch peak height, this freestanding double-wall is huge in every way. Six-footers can stand up inside without ducking, and six sleepers enjoy plenty of elbow room. Doors on adjoining (rather than opposite) sides create fantastic views when the fly's rolled back. "Sitting inside on a drizzly night, we watched the sunset over Lake Dinosaur," says a Colorado tester.

► **Vestibules** Two vestibules (17 and 9 square feet) are just big enough for packs and boots (one group stored all gear in one, keeping the other door free for exits). Parallel zippers on the smaller vestibule let it convert to a porch-style awning supported by trekking poles.

► **Setup** Two crossing poles make for straightforward setup, but short folks can't do it alone: Clipping the top of the canopy to the poles requires someone 5'6" or taller.

► **Packability** Weighty and bulky when packed (think carry-on suitcase), this shelter is best for basecamping, paddling, and short-mileage trips. However, by divvying the fly, poles, and tent body, we found it a realistic substitute three two-person shelters.

► **Downside** Fully guyed, the Optic 6 proved stable in 20-mph winds, but it flapped loudly. Sheltered sites suit this tall, broad-sided tent best.

► \$399; 15 lbs. 2 oz.;
mountainhardwear.com

+ FIELD TIPS

Campsite selection Avoid low spots where water can pool. In buggy conditions, look for breezy sites. In hot, sunny places, opt for shady spots to keep your tent cool and minimize UV damage.

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BAGS

Backstory

Millet's fast-packing design team began experimenting with new ways to stow the Alpine LTK 800 (page 88). By ditching the stuffsack for a lightweight, integrated swatch of fabric, they came up with a simpler way to pack up. Bonus: one less thing to keep track of.

PHOTO BY ANDREW BYDLON

TRENDING DUCK DOWN

Goose down used to be the go-to insulation for high-end bags, but that's changing fast. More than a third of the bags in this guide use duck down, and it's showing up in apparel as well (see the Millet Langtang on page 130). The reason: Duck down costs less than goose, yet there's no compromise in performance.

The International Down and Feather Testing Laboratory, an independent facility, states there's no discernable warmth variance between birds of a different feather, as long as they have the same fill power. So why is duck down cheaper than goose? Because there's so much more of it. Down is a byproduct of the food industry, and the world consumes much more duck than goose (duck is 80 percent of the market, compared to 20 for goose).

This year, the first ever 850-fill duck down sleeping bag, the NEMO Equipment Sonic (page 20), hits the market, and it's nearly 30 percent less expensive than an equivalent goose down version. But don't expect to see everything go the way of the drake; goose down will still dominate the premium pieces because high fill-power (like 800) requires larger down clusters, and geese produce more of those simply because they're larger birds.



ON THE WEB

Check out our Hall of Fame bag and pad picks at backpacker.com/bestbags.



[FUN FOR TWO]

Sierra Designs Backcountry Bed Duo

Why we like it **Frankly, our reasons aren't suitable for a family magazine. Use your imagination.**

► **Fit** There's only one thing that could've made our senior editor like the 2014 Editors' Choice Award-winning Backcountry Bed more: room for his wife. Like the original version, the Duo eschews zippers for a 64-inch-wide integrated "comforter" that folds down for easy entry, folds up for warmth, and folds any which way to suit your preferences. At 106.5 inches across the shoulders, there's enough room for all but the broadest of couples to fit together. (Note: The dual pad sleeves work best with rectangular mattresses; other shapes create gaps in the middle.)

► **Weight** Because the Duo requires less overall material than a pair of separate bags, designers were able to use cost-effective, 600-fill DriDown (from ducks) and still keep the weight less than 2 pounds per person. Compressibility is excellent at 9 by 16 inches.

► **Warmth** The comforter's shape is slightly larger than the opening it fills, making it easy to tuck in the sides and create a natural seal to trap warmth. Downside: More svelte couples may have a hard time filling the space. One warm-sleeping couple stuffed a puffy into the bottom to eat up extra room and stayed warm in the upper 20s during a trek on Zion National Park's East Rim. But a cold-sleeping couple had to add layers and huddle for warmth with temps in the 30s.

► \$499; 3 lbs. 15 oz.; 30°F; sierradesigns.com

[THE ANTI-MUMMY]

NEMO Equipment Tango Solo

Why we like it **It's like sleeping with your comforter at home.**

► **Design** Despise constricting mummy bags? Consider this the antidote. The Tango Solo is a rectangular, 63-inch-wide blanket with a 15.5-inch-deep pocket at the foot for tucking in your sleeping pad. The down-filled tubes on either side naturally weigh down the edges to prevent drafts from sneaking in, but it's easy to stick a limb out to ventilate if you get too toasty. There's also an option to tie the sides around your pad via webbing loops, but we never needed it.

► **Warmth** The combo of 700-fill DownTek duck down and traditional box baffle construction (internal baffle walls are perfectly perpendicular to the shell and liner) is simple but effective. Not so traditional: the rectangular hood, which, despite the unusual shape, kept us warm (with a beanie) in near-freezing temps while sleeping under a tarp. A caveat for side sleepers: The bag can form an "A-frame" from the edge of the pad to your shoulder, creating large air pockets that are tough to warm up.

► **Comfort** As with many quilt-style bags, you sleep directly on your mattress. Because pads can feel rubbery and uncomfortable, we suggest sleeping in long johns.

► **Packability** Despite the extra-comfortable wide cut, the Tango Solo compresses to 15 by 10 inches. Bonus for tall guys and gals: The regular length fits up to 6'4".

► \$300; 1 lb. 13 oz.; 30°F; nemoequipment.com



[EDITORS' CHOICE]

Mountain Hardware HyperLamina Spark

► \$220; 1 lb. 10 oz.; 35°F; mountainhardware.com
See page 20 for review.



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Design School

Most ultralight bags are one-trick ponies. A full-length center zip and other features boost the Flicker's versatility.



[LIGHTWEIGHT
CHAMELEON]

Feathered Friends Flicker 20

\$389; 1 lb. 11 oz.; 20°F;
featheredfriends.com

FILL

Premium 900-fill goose down makes this bag extremely lofty, warm for its weight, and super-packable (9.5 by 5 inches). It's also rare: The 900-fill is in short supply because there are few geese big enough to produce the large clusters needed for this fill weight.

BAFFLES

The continuous horizontal baffles wrap around the entire bag (there's no seam or wall along the side to separate the baffle, like you see in traditional bags), allowing you to fine-tune the insulation. In quilt mode, it's best to spread the down from end to end to avoid any cold spots. In the mummy configuration, move the center zip to the side (like a traditional bag) and shift the down by lifting the bag on one side and shaking it until all the down migrates to the far end of the baffles. This puts down only on top of the bag (similar to the design of backless sleeping bags), keeping the feathers from getting compressed underneath you. Downside: This can create cold spots for side sleepers or those who routinely toss and turn.

HAMMOCK LOVERS

Side loops let you secure the Flicker as an underquilt, which means it wraps around the outside of the hammock and doesn't get compressed underneath your body.

ZIPPER

The unique, full-length (78-inch) center zip instantly transforms the Flicker from a hoodless mummy to a quilt. "One night I was sharing a blanket with my honey by the campfire, and the next weekend I was bundled up in a mummy bag in sub-freezing temps in Arizona's Glen Canyon," says one tester. Ding: The zipper is snag-prone due to the lack of backing.

FOOTBOX

A drawcord around the footbox cinches tightly to create the mummy shape, but in quilt mode the foot end is wide enough to cover two in a pinch (just be prepared to spoon).





[SUPER PACKABLE]
Millet Alpine LTK 800

Why we like it **Minimalist design translates to excellent packability and low weight, all at a reasonable cost.**

► **Packability** This 32°F bag compresses down to water bottle size, which came in handy on a 70-mile trip in the Grand Canyon when our packs were overflowing. Unique: Instead of a stuffsack, an integrated 27-by-14-inch swath of fabric wraps and cinches around the bag. The sharp taper (63 inches at the shoulder and 39 at the feet) also contributes to packability and thermal efficiency, but it polarized our team in terms of comfort; some of us felt pinched at the feet. Test out this bag at home or in the store to

make sure the tailored fit is for you.

► **Warmth** Millet took an economical approach when selecting the insulation and internal architecture for this bag, but it still performed beyond expectations during testing. The classic box baffle design and 700-fill duck down kept us comfortable down to 30°F (two degrees below the rating) on the Grand Canyon's South Rim.

► **Durability** The 20-denier ripstop polyester is tougher than it seems. It endured a week of cowboy camping in the Southwest without a hiccup.

► **Hood** The minimalist hood is thin and shallow; pack a warm beanie.

► \$230; 1 lb. 12 oz.; 32°F; millet.fr

three-season

[ULTRALIGHT MUMMY]
Sea to Summit Spark Sp III

Why we like it **Premium materials and efficient design give this one of the best warmth-to-weight ratios we've seen.**

► **Warmth** We pushed this bag in wet conditions that challenged its temp rating. During an all-night storm in a tiny tent in Wyoming's Wind River Range, we woke up to a sopping wet fly pressed against the lower half of our bags. Despite the damp footbox shell, our bare feet never got chilled, even with temps in the upper 20s. The warmth comes from 850-fill, water-resistant goose down that's strategically distributed to maximize efficiency. Fifty-five percent of the bag's overall fill resides in the top—with more concentrated around the core, where you need it. This design reduces the amount of down

compressed underneath you (which doesn't provide any insulation when flattened), while still maintaining a low overall weight. The contoured hood fits well.

► **Materials** The wispy, 10-denier Pertex Quantum shell and 1/3-length zipper keep weight down. Be careful though: We managed to rip a 1/16-inch hole in the draft tube after (frustrated) yanking on a snagged zipper. Thanks to the ultralight fabrics and short zipper, it compresses to an extraordinarily small 9 by 5 inches. However, that short zip limits venting; we used it as more of a quilt in warm, humid conditions.

► **Fit** At only 57 inches at the shoulders, the fit is on the trim side, so larger folks and restless sleepers may favor a roomier bag.

► \$439; 1 lb. 6 oz.; 25°F; seatosummit.com

+ FIELD TIPS

Boost warmth. Before bed, have a hot drink and do sit-ups. In the bag, wear dry socks and a beanie.



INNOVATORS
CAM
BRENSINGER,
NEMO EQUIPMENT

Transitioning from designing spacesuits to manufacturing tents, bags, and pads might not seem like a natural career arc. But that's what Cam Brensinger did when he left MIT's BioSuit project and founded NEMO Equipment. He showed up on the outdoor scene in 2004 with a tent that substituted air beams for poles, and his continued

challenges to conventional design have earned NEMO bags Editors' Choice Awards two out of the last three years. "We consider comfort a performance parameter, and I draw a lot of inspiration from my personal experience," he says. For example, the gills on the Editors' Choice-winning Sonic (page 20) came from a galvanizing

personal experience on Denali. "I spent weeks out in the field in a -40°F bag, but not every night required that kind of over-the-top warmth. Traditional venting wasn't cutting it, so I came home and started building our initial concept for the gills."

In fact, many of NEMO's innovative sleeping systems come from

Cam's adventures. "The Fillo came straight from the lousy experience I had with camping pillows; I came into NEMO one day and declared we were going to make the best camping pillow on the market." We've tried it: Made with inflatable baffles, memory foam, and a microfiber cover, the Fillo is truly as luxurious as camp pillows get.

Upgrade Get a compression sack for easier packing. We like Granite Gear's eVent Sil Compression Drysacks (granitegear.com).

OUR DOWN PROMISE

Ethically produced down of the highest quality

Thanks to our 40 years of extensive experience in working with down, we have managed to establish a unique and transparent production process where all our down is 100% traceable. This means that when you purchase a down product from us, we can guarantee that it contains only ethically produced down of the highest quality.



Pak Down Jacket



fjallraven.us

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Head to Head

Both of these bags feature a combo of down and synthetic insulations and attractive price tags; one will save you even more money and the other will let you press deep into shoulder season.



Kelty Dualist 22

\$149; 2 lbs. 15 oz.; 22°F;
kelty.com

The basic hood and easily accessible drawcord allow for one-handed operation, but without a draft collar, cold air seeps in.

There's plenty of shoulder room in this bag with 62 and 58 inches at the shoulder and hips, respectively. The footbox is warm but tight (40 inches).

Kelty takes a layered approach: The Dualist is like a synthetic bag (proprietary ThermaPro) within a 550-fill DriDown (duck) sack. The layered construction allows you to roll around with your bag and always have synthetic fill below you; it compresses less than down so you never sacrifice warmth.

We were so warm on a 30°F night in Targhee National Forest that we had to open the zipper. But in the low 20s, we needed insulated jackets to keep warm.

The nylon shell is durable but lacks the Marmot's water resistance. In 30°F temps on the North Teton Trail, it soaked up condensation from the tent walls, which led to cold spots in the footbox.

8 by 15 inches

BEST FOR

Weekend warriors looking for a heck of a deal, but who won't push the 22°F temp rating



Marmot Scandium 20

\$199; 2 lbs. 14 oz.; 20°F;
marmot.com

A 2-inch-wide face muff drapes across the neck, sealing in heat. The hood cinches down to blow-hole size, but the toggle is inconveniently on the outside.

The traditional mummy shape (61 inches at the shoulders tapering to 58 inches at the hip and 45 inches at the foot) offers great thermal efficiency. The broadest-shouldered hikers may feel squeezed.

Proprietary SpiraFil synthetic fill, with large, stiff, hollow fibers, lines the underside of the bag and resists compression better than the 650-fill duck down that insulates the top. This construction is best for those who don't move much (or turn within their bags), so the SpiraFil always stays against the ground.

We felt comfortable in the mid-20s with just a baselayer, and we'd confidently take it into the upper teens with a puffy.

The 30-denier nylon on top shaves ounces, while the tough 70-denier polyester base is ideal for camping sans tent or using the bag as a lounge around camp.

7 by 14 inches with included compression sack

BEST FOR

Backpackers looking for a value bag they can confidently press into shoulder season

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WATER REPELLENT DOWN

Experience Mother Nature in **ALL HER ELEMENTS**

MADE WITH DOWNTEK

Big Agnes®
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Sleep System Bag
with 850 fill power

**Water. Rain. Sweat. Snow.
Anything wet.**

Mother Nature designed down clusters to trap pockets of air, which insulate and keep you warm. Then moisture comes along and eliminates all of that. Enter DownTek™ Water Repellent Down. DownTek™ shields those insulating-air-trapping-clusters from all things wet...keeping you dry.

Find out more at **DOWN-TEK.COM**



THERE'S A REASON LEADING TECHNICAL
BRANDS CONTINUE TO CHOOSE DOWNTEK™



TRENDING ETHICAL DOWN STANDARDS

More and more bag (and jacket) companies are determined to help you sleep with a clear conscience. Although many duck and goose farms have ethical harvesting practices, there are still issues with live plucking, force feeding, and inhumane slaughtering (down is a byproduct of the meat industry). Hence, the need to know where your fluff comes from.

Fjällräven was one of the first to tackle the issue, in 2009, applying some of the industry's strictest guidelines to their supply chain (they work with only one supplier and audit with their own vets). It's called the Fjällräven Down Promise (see a video about the program at fjallraven.us). Mountain Equipment, another European brand, has an auditing program as well.

More recently, The North Face (with the Responsible Down Standard) and Patagonia (Traceable Down Standard) have cosponsored creation of varying standards for their own products that can be shared among brands. For example, Feathered Friends, which has long sourced ethical down from small farms (but without regular audits), employs 100 percent RDS-certified down starting this season.

[PAD INCLUDED]

Eddie Bauer First Ascent Airbender

Why we like it **The integrated pad and bag create a lightweight, toasty sleep system that punches above its weight.**

► **Warmth** Our cold-sleeping tester saw temps in the mid-teens in the Tetons, and she was worried she'd freeze. "But I was so warm, I didn't even need to heat a water bottle to cuddle up to." Sewing the pad directly to the bag creates a closed system that maximizes heat retention (less of the warmth in your bag is lost due to cold spots, slipping off your mat during the night, etc.). Also, the 3.5-inch-thick pad's synthetic insulation makes this suitable for year-round conditions, as validated by some of our editors who slept directly on the snow in British Columbia. But we recommend you make sure the pad fits you before you buy: The Airbender only comes in one size, and some testers were chilled when their heads and/or feet hung off the 70.5-inch mat.

► **Weight** Integrating the pad and bag shaves weight by removing almost the entire bottom third of traditional fill and materials. "Typically the total weight of a bag this warm and an insulated pad would be upward of 3.5 pounds, and that's if you're combining already lightweight products," says one of our more experienced testers. Thank the featherweight ingredients: 850-fill, DownTek-treated goose down, small amounts of ClimaShield HL synthetic to boost moisture resistance in key areas, and a 15-denier Pertex Quantum shell. It shrinks to 8 by 12 inches with the included compression sack (which doubles as an air pump).

► **Durability** We tested this bag for nearly a year and didn't have any issues with sticky zippers, leaky mats, or torn shells. Bummer: Innovation like this ain't cheap.

► \$799; 20°F; 3 lbs. 1 oz.; eddiebauer.com



[DEEP COLD]

The North Face Inferno -20

Why we like it **Jumping into this bag on a cold night is as cozy as relaxing on a bearskin rug by the fire.**

► **Warmth** The Inferno singlehandedly saved one tester's two-week trip to Mongolia's Altai Mountains. "I was beyond chilled from the subzero temps all day, and this bag became my refuge each night," she says. Credit the 800-fill, water-resistant goose down overstuffed into trapezoidal baffles: The offset walls of trapezoidal baffles keep down from falling to the end of the chamber when you rotate onto your side, nixing cold spots. The 4.5-inch-thick draft collar and 3.5-inch-wide draft tube—both of which are larger than standard—seal the deal.

► **Comfort** Like the Editors' Choice Award-winning Mountain Hardware HyperLamina, the Inferno's 33-inch center zip allows you to easily sit up and do tent chores without leaving the warmth of the bag, and

it's long enough to sufficiently vent on warmer evenings (we slept comfortably in the low 30s). The 64-inch shoulder girth accommodates a puffy if you're a cold sleeper or gives you enough room to roll around if you have to hole up during an extended storm.

► **Details** Water-resistant fabric protects the footbox and hood and kept frost and condensation-coated tent walls from chilling us. At less than 3.5 pounds and only 11 by 20 inches when stuffed, it's very packable (and affordable) relative to others in its class.

► \$599; -20°F; 3 lbs. 5 oz.; thenorthface.com



[EDITORS' CHOICE]

NEMO Equipment Sonic

► \$500; 2 lbs. 11 oz.; 0°F; nemoequipment.com
See page 20 for full review.



Inspect the zipper While shopping, climb inside the bag and run the zipper up and down several times. Does it slide smoothly?

MOUNTAIN
HARD
WEAR 

There's no better synthetic bag.

Our new Lamina series bags set a new standard for synthetic bag performance. With the warmest synthetic fill (warmer by weight than Primaloft® One), heat-saving welded construction, and zoned insulation normally found only in down bags, The HyperLamina and Lamina Z are the best synthetic bags you can buy.



Lamina Z is designed exclusively for REI.
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Mike Libeck wakes up from the best night's sleep in Greenland.
Photo: Andy Mann

mountainhardwear.com

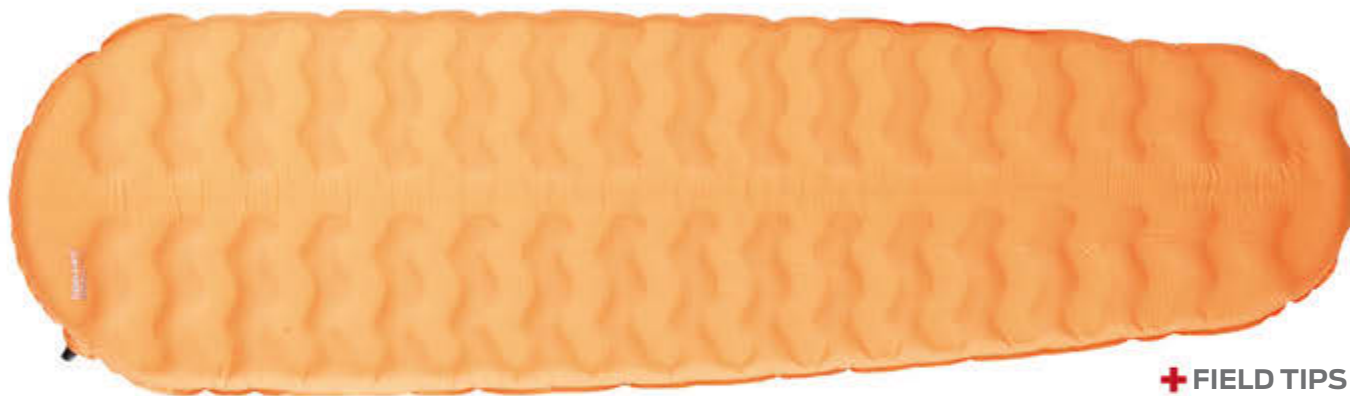
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/pads



+ FIELD TIPS

Slip-proof your pad. Dot the top with Seam Grip (\$7; mcnett.com), especially in the hip and torso areas. Let cure for 24 hours.

[SELF-INFLATING]

Therm-a-Rest Evolite

Why we like it It has all the appeal of old-school self-inflators—roll it out and watch the pad do all the work—but compresses to half the size of its predecessors, thanks to some new-school tricks.

► **Convenience** We hate having to manually blow up pads at altitude when we're tanked from a long day of hiking. The Evolite inflates on its own in about 15 minutes (you may want to top it off with a few puffs if you prefer your pad firm).

► **Compressibility** Built with alternating foam and air channels, the Evolite uses about 40 percent less foam than traditional self-inflating

pads, yet provides 2.5 inches of back support. And Therm-a-Rest's new Atmos foam is unique, too: It's produced in an atmospheric-controlled chamber that literally reduces the effect of gravity on the foam as it sets, making it extra soft and lightweight. The Evolite weighs in at just over a pound and packs barely larger than a 1-liter water bottle, so you can drop it easily inside your pack, avoiding the wear and tear pads incur when strapped on the outside.

► **Warmth** With an R-value of 2.1 (a measure of insulation; higher is warmer), it's best for temps above 40°F (or warm sleepers).

► \$120 (regular); 1 lb. 1 oz.; 2.1 R-value; 72"x20"x2"; thermarest.com

PHOTOS BY BEN FULLERTON

American made quality for over 45 years.

MADE IN
USA

www.westernmountaineering.com

The background of the advertisement shows a blue and black sleeping bag lying on a snowy surface in a mountainous landscape with a lake and trees.

[EDITORS' CHOICE]

Sea to Summit Comfort Plus

► \$190; 1 lb. 11 oz.; 79"x25"x2.5";
seatosummit.com
See page 22 for the review.



[INSULATED LIGHTWEIGHT]

Exped SynMat HyperLite

Why we like it **Get big-time warmth that packs down almost as small as a beer can.**

► **Compressibility** The secret to the pad's impressive warmth-to-packability ratio is a reduction in the insulation density combined with a sharp taper from the hips (20.5 inches) to the feet (just 13 inches). The narrow foot dimensions make it easy to inflate (because it has less overall volume), but the restless sleepers among us had trouble keeping their legs on the pad.

► **Warmth** Exped affixes the insulation to both the top and bottom of the shell, which maximizes loft and R-value. We stayed comfortable down to 28°F in Banff National Park while camping on snow. Want the warmth but need a bigger cut? There's also a long and wide version that weighs about 4 ounces more and costs an extra \$20.

► \$169; 12 oz.; 3.2 R-value; 72"x20.5"x2.8"; exped.com



Introducing the

Sub7 Hammock

6½ ounces of ultralight comfort



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HYBRID LANGTANG HOODIE

New-generation thermal protection. Hybrid build : Down-insulated torso and Pertex® Quantum Ultra Light shell. Unlined sleeves in Stunner Stretch by Toray, for greater freedom and excellent water repellency. Ergonomic integral hood. 2 handwarmer pockets. Stow pocket.



SHELLS



Backstory

In the Allout Jacket (page 110), Outdoor Research doubled the length of the pocket zipper (to 14 inches), added a second slider and bartacked a hard stop in the middle, creating a 7-inch hand pocket below a 7-inch vent. Voila! One zipper, two jobs.

PHOTO BY ANDREW BYDLON



[TRAIL RUNNER'S PICK]

Patagonia Storm Racer

Why we like it **We could run hard in it all day, even in mild weather.**

- **Breathability** Trail runners, cross-country skiers, and other high-output testers often prefer softshells. They're willing to swap hardshell waterproofing for better breathability, which is a good deal unless you get caught in a soaker. Enter the Storm Racer, which offers a simple solution. Since even the best waterproof/breathable membranes have trouble keeping up with hardworking bodies, Patagonia designers used affordable, 2.5-layer fabric and looked to mechanical airflow for cooling. They gave the Storm Racer two zippered vents on the biceps and two vertical back vents. With vents open, steam escapes and cool air flows through the jacket. Result: You never get swamped in your own sweat. The back vents keep air flowing even when you're wearing a daypack, though a large pack blocks them.
- **Protection** We deployed the Storm Racer against sharp wind in Olympic National Park, drizzle on Washington's Tiger Mountain, and a high-altitude hailstorm in the central Cascades, and, with the vents zipped, not a drop seeped in. (A little rain sneaks in with vents open.) Cuffs that extend over the backs of the hands, a high, wind-deflecting collar, and an adjustable, rollaway hood enhance protection.
- **Fit** The athletic cut fits best over just a baselayer.
- **Durability** Despite its wispy weight, the 30-denier nylon stood up to a season of long-distance runs and off-trail bushwhacking without a scratch.
- **Features** The cozy, knit collar lining and reflective patches (nice for urban night running) get a thumbs up. But the minimalist zipper is prone to snagging.
- \$279; 7.5 oz.; patagonia.com

[EDITORS' CHOICE UPDATE]

Marmot Crux

Why we like it **It's a souped-up version of the lightweight and breathable Essence, a 2014 Editors' Choice Award-winner, with better coverage and durability.**

- **Breathability** Marmot's 2.5-layer NanoPro Membrain employs an air-permeable membrane with millions of heat-venting micropores. Sure, we got sweaty while climbing in the Pacific Northwest in mild, humid weather, but not enough to be uncomfortable. Mesh-backed pockets effectively pinch-hit as vents.
- **Features** Marmot added polyurethane patches on the shoulders and hips to increase abrasion resistance. We also like the helmet-compatible-yet-close-cinching hood and the generously long sleeves that work well with gloves and kept our base-layers dry. Another upgrade: the addition of two hand pockets.
- **Fit** Trim but not restrictive, the slightly stretchy Crux accommodates a light puffy underneath. But when worn with just a baselayer, it doesn't feel like a sail.
- **Protection** It proved weathertight on Colorado mountain passes, in all-day drenchers in the Mt. Hood Wilderness, and while hanging from a rope deep inside a dripping North Cascades crevasse during rescue training. Minor gripe: A few of us wished for adjustable cuffs to better seal out wind.
- **Packability** The superlight, 20-denier nylon (a slightly tougher fabric than the Essence's) crunches to grapefruit size.
- \$275; 8.5 oz.; marmot.com

+ FIELD TIPS

Add insulation in cold, dry weather.

If your shell doesn't fit over your puffy, wear it underneath to buy yourself several degrees of warmth.



The test Miles hiked: 4,100+ / Highest elevation: 19,900 feet in Peru / Strongest wind: 75 mph in New Zealand / Coldest temp: -15°F in British Columbia

S H E L L S

Design School

One-piece construction with fewer seams delivers enhanced breathability and a streamlined aesthetic.



[ALMOST SEAMLESS]

The North Face FuseForm Originator

\$299; 11 oz.; thenorthface.com

FABRIC

The North Face weaves a heftier, high-tenacity Cordura nylon into a lighter, 40-denier nylon at the yarn level, so the fabric transitions from one to the other without seams or seam tape. The result: a tougher fabric on the high-abrasion areas on the shell's shoulders and upper back and a more breathable material on the bottom. And because designers don't have to cut and sew two different materials together, you get a smoother look and feel, a more durably waterproof exterior, less weight, and better breathability. The slightly stretchy fabric didn't restrict our movement when we wore midlayers or down sweaters underneath. But the liner feels grabby on bare arms, like a water balloon.

POCKETS

You get two hand pockets placed clear of pack hipbelts and climbing harnesses. Each closes with a thin, low-profile zipper to match the shell's minimalist look. A small inner chest pocket fits keys but not a wallet or phone.

MEMBRANE

The North Face's 2.5-layer HyVent fabric felt more breathable in the Originator than in other shells we've tried, thanks to the seamless design. "I never felt like too much moisture was building up inside the jacket, even on steep approaches in Colorado's Eldorado Canyon State Park," says a tester.

ADJUSTABLE CUFFS AND HEM

Sleeves seal tightly with slim Velcro straps that kept out cold drafts. Testers could lock in warmth at the hem by cinching cord toggles placed inside the pockets for a streamlined look.

CONSTRUCTION

To enhance the shell's streamlined exterior, designers start with a single piece of fabric, which is then folded origami-style and sewn precisely into an athletic-fitting jacket (this also reduces the total number of seams, maximizing the benefits of the FuseForm fabric). According to The North Face, dialing in the pattern was a major challenge, as the easiest way to fine-tune fit is by adding seams. Designers went through more than 20 versions before getting tricky details like the arm hole size and shoulder shape just right.

HOOD

Designers stuck to one adjustment cord on the back of the hood to keep the fabric pattern as simple as possible, and testers found the hood adjustable enough to protect their heads. But it only fits over low-profile climbing helmets.

SEAMS

Sewn seams have two major drawbacks in a waterproof shell. First, they're vulnerable to abrasion and one of the most likely spots for a jacket to fail. Secondly, seam tape is less breathable than a shell's membrane, so it physically obstructs the jacket's waterproof/breathable technology. By combining the FuseForm weave (see Fabric) with a one-piece pattern (see Construction), the Originator dramatically cuts down on seams: The jacket uses only 11 yards of seam tape, compared to 24 yards on a comparable shell without those innovations.





[KILLER DEAL]

Columbia Sleeker

Why we like it **It performs better than some shells that cost three times as much.**

- **Protection** During biblical rains that washed away trails in Banff National Park, the Sleeker proved a veritable Noah's ark. And when a squall blew in while we were climbing a via ferrata on Canada's Mt. Norquay, the hood slipped easily over helmets while tight-sealing cuffs kept out drips when our arms were extended. The trick to achieving high performance for a low price? Columbia uses its own waterproof/breathable technology rather than a pricier membrane.
- **Breathability** The shell's biggest tradeoff: Columbia's two-layer Omni-Tech fabric offers

middle-of-the-road breathability. But the 9-inch-long, mesh-backed hand pockets provide some airflow to compensate. Ding: The nylon inner surface feels rubbery against bare arms.

- **Features** You get the latest zipper technology on the two hand pockets: Columbia's smooth-running Lightrail. The thin, flexible zips are bonded directly to a lightweight strip of fabric, eliminating seams and bulky tape to cut weight and enhance packability.
- **Fit** The generous cut is great for layering or stocky frames.
- **Packability** The Sleeker stuffs to the size of a butternut squash.
- **\$80; 9.9 oz.;** columbia.com

[MOST COMFORTABLE]

MontBell Storm Cruiser Jacket

Why we like it **You get burly hardshell protection on the outside and a supple, cozy feel inside.**

- **Feel** Hate rigid, crinkly, or trash-baggy jackets that feel plasticky next to the skin? The Storm Cruiser is softer and more flexible than other shells. The secret: The three-layer Gore-Tex fabric employs Gore's new C-KNIT backer, which is woven in a springy, circular pattern from very fine nylon yarn (similar to pantyhose), creating a thinner, lighter, more pliable-feeling shell.
- **Breathability** Gore says the C-KNIT backer, which is thinner than its previous liner fabrics, boosts breathability by up to 10 percent. Our testers say the Storm Cruiser is good, but not excellent, in this category. On

steep ascents during a warm, steady drizzle on New Hampshire's Mt. Lafayette, one tester found it sufficiently breathable with the 16.5-inch pit zips open.

- **Protection** Dumping rain, wet snow, and 35-mph winds on top of the White Mountains' Mt. Moosilauke were no match for this shell. The two-way adjustable hood cinches precisely to protect the face (it's roomy, but not big enough for a helmet).
- **Fit** It's on the athletic side, but generous enough for multiple layers underneath. Dings: The elbows aren't articulated, making for uncomfortable bunches, and testers wished for a longer hem.
- **Packability** Light yet durable, it fits inside a Nalgene.
- **\$279; 10 oz.;** montbell.us



INNOVATORS
MICHAEL GLAVIN
SIERRA DESIGNS

The problem with waterproof/breathable jackets, as every hiker knows, is that breathability has limits. Hike hard, especially while wearing a heavy pack, and the fabric can't move moisture fast enough: You get wet from sweat on the inside. Hence the addition of pit zips, torso vents, and other means of improving airflow. Since 1976,

when Gore-Tex debuted, that's pretty much the script every shell manufacturer has followed. But this year, Sierra Designs is rewriting the whole screenplay, putting airflow before breathability. "We got radical," says Michael Glavin, the company's vice president and brand manager, who spends loads of time testing wet-weather solutions.

Sierra Designs' new strategy: Forget seeking out the most breathable fabrics and instead focus on mechanical venting to cool the core. This year's Elite Cagoule features a baggy, poncho-esque design that extends well past the hips; a long front flap lets you buckle your hipbelt under the shell without pinching off the ventilation. The Cagoule

pairs with chaps-style pants that cover only the lower legs.

"I'm sure it will freak people out," Glavin says. "But when you're wearing a long coat and it's raining, suddenly you look pretty smart." So does the unconventional approach work? Read about the Cagoule on page 104 and check out the Patagonia Storm Racer (page 98).

Check the hood Cinch it snug. How's your peripheral vision? Does the hood move with you when you turn your head?

YES,

...it replaces your four-season ground tent.
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**[MOST VERSATILE]****Montane Featherlite Shell Jacket**

Why we like it **One light and breathable jacket gets you four seasons' worth of protection.**

- **Protection** We hunkered down inside the Featherlite in freezing rain in the Wind River Range, summer storms in the Colorado Rockies, and wintry, 30-mph winds in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The verdict: always dry and comfortable. Storm-ready touches include a deep hood with an exceptionally well-formed wire brim for max protection and a long hem that blocked rain and wind when we bent over to pitch a tent.
- **Breathability** It features the new eVent DVstorm, an air-permeable membrane eVent says is 40 percent lighter and 15 percent more breathable than the original (already one of the airier fabrics we've tested). The company pulled it off by using a more open microporous structure. eVent has always been riddled with ultra-tiny holes of varying sizes, too small to let rain in, but large enough to allow sweat vapor to escape; the new membrane has more large pores. The thin, 15-denier face fabric and 10-denier backer further enhance breathability. One Colorado tester said it prevented him from overheating in challenging conditions: "I huffed and puffed while breaking trail in 2 feet of powder," he says. "I got steamy, but not sweaty, and when I stopped, I was dry in a minute and change." A different tester still wished for pit zips when hauling a 50-pound pack uphill in a 50°F summer shower.
- **Durability** The tradeoff for better breathability: DVstorm is less durably waterproof than former iterations. We didn't notice any weakness in protection over a season of hard use, but this may not be the best choice if you typically haul a heavy pack in the roughest conditions.
- **Packability** Good for a four-season shell: It packs to cantaloupe size.
- **Fit** Cut is athletic, with ample room for a baselayer and winter mid-layer. The articulated shoulders leave extra space for arm movement, so we could reach and pole plant without yanking the shell out of our hipbelts. Nitpicks: Water-resistant zippers are stiff and fabric is "crinkly and wrinkly."

► \$399; 10.5 oz.; montane.co.uk

[BOMBER]**Mammut Meron Light**

Why we like it **This watertight force field with all the bells and whistles proved impenetrable in the gnarliest conditions.**

- **Weather protection** "I wore this in a truly torrential downpour over a long slog," reports one tester. "Everyone else in my group was soaking, and my rain pants failed, but my top stayed dry." Gore's newest iteration of the windproof, three-layer Pro Shell fabric, which is the most durable Gore-Tex option, also shielded testers in wind-whipped snow in the Alaska's Chugach National Forest. We could custom-cinch the two-way-adjustable hood against stiff breezes, the hem extends well below a hipbelt, and the pockets (two hand, one chest, and one inner) are leakproof. Nitpicks: The waterproof zippers are tough to engage (a common issue) and the fabric feels stiff.

- **Durability** We sent the Meron Light to a hardcore Alaska tester who regularly battles gear-shredding vegetation off-trail. His report: Not a mark on the 70-denier nylon face fabric (even-tougher, 150-denier nylon sections protect the shoulders, hem, and sleeves), and the shell's streamlined profile and small zipper pulls reduced snagging.

- **Breathability** Gore claims the Pro Shell fabric has 28 percent more breathability than previous versions, and we agree that it's highly effective at dumping heat. On a difficult moraine traverse in blowing snow in the Chugach Range, we stayed dry and comfortable inside, despite heavy exertion and a big pack. Pit zips with two-way zippers add extra venting.

- **Fit** It's best as a layering piece for athletic (not hefty) builds.

► \$500; 15.9 oz. (m's L); mammut.ch



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[RADICAL VENTILATION]

Sierra Designs Elite Cagoule and Elite Rain Chaps

Why we like it **This unusual trench-and-chaps combo maximizes airflow for comfortable, ultra-light protection.**

► **Breathability** Rather than using a high-tech waterproof/breathable membrane, Sierra Designs used a light, less-expensive membrane and built the Cagoule to provide constant airflow through large vents. And though it looks a bit odd—a thigh-length, baggy pullover worn over waterproof chaps—testers say the design works. A 15.5-inch front flap lets you buckle your hipbelt under the shell to preserve venting through the bottom (Velcro dots close it in nasty weather), and covered armpit vents cool the upper body. The chaps, naturally, leave the lap zone unencumbered by fabric. The verdict: “The jacket’s upper gathered some condensation while I was hiking the steep trail to Kanaka Peak in Whiskeytown Recreation Area,” says a California tester. “But the open lap and butt and flowy bottom breathe better than

most shells. It looks weird, but it works.”

► **Packability** The Cagoule’s very light, 2-layer nylon construction (except at the knees, which use 3-layer fabric for improved comfort with shorts) and complete lack of zippers enable the whole set to pack down to baseball size.

► **Protection** One tester was skeptical the system would keep him dry in a true downpour, but reported: “The tunic-length jacket covered up all the bits the chaps didn’t, so I was totally protected.” Fabric gutters along the front flap and pit vents help channel drips away from the body, and the adjustable hood cinches well enough to block sideways rain. Nitpick: Shortish sleeves exposed our arms to the rain when we reached.

► **Fit** It’s a hiking and backpacking cut: loose and billowy. The jacket is not ideal for speedy activities such as trail running or cycling. The cut easily fits midlayers and down puffers.

► **Jacket:** \$129; 6.5 oz. (men’s L); **Chaps:** \$69; 5 oz. (men’s L); sierradesigns.com

**TRENDING
GREENER
DWR**

A shell’s first line of defense against the elements is its DWR (durable water repellent) finish, a chemical treatment that repels moisture. But DWRs have a dark side: They’re made from perfluorinated chemicals (PFCs), long-lasting “long-chain” substances that accumulate in the environment and have been found in everything from Arctic sea ice to human breast milk. PFCs have never been proven safe for humans, and the EPA has asked major chemical companies to start phasing them out this year.

That’s left outdoor companies scrambling to find a greener alternative. Most are turning to short-chain PFCs, which provide water resistance but don’t last as long in the environment (or on a shell, but a wash and tumble dry will revive the finish). Other companies worry that the short-chain DWRs still aren’t green enough. A few companies are ahead of the issue. Montane has already switched to a short-chain version on all new outerwear (including the Featherlite, page 102; we didn’t notice a performance difference during a season of use). Nikwax uses fluorocarbon-free chemistries in its aftermarket waterproofing treatment. And Fjällräven’s Keb Eco-Shell (coming in summer) features a fluorine-free DWR paired with recycled polyester. Our field-testing has begun.

Check the hem Make sure the jacket tucks underneath your pack hipbelt and doesn’t expose your back when you bend over.

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*photo courtesy of Eddie Bauer/Jake Norton



SHELLS

Head to Head

Both shells appeal to ounce-counters, but one delivers features, the other saves you money.

Dynafit Transalper 3L (\$249; 4.5 oz.; dynafit.com sizes)

This 3-layer shell uses a super-light polyurethane (PU) membrane. Breathability is good, but not great. We steamed up on the uphills on rainy, 40°F hikes in the Pacific Northwest.

Swiss cheese-style holes at the armpits in both the front and back dump heat, making it more comfortable than the Rab.

The fabric turned back Alaskan drizzle and Seattle all-day soakers without fail, and a flap guards against leaks at the pit vents. Gripe: The sleeves are oddly short, which leaves wrists exposed on even average-size hikers.

Too small for all but the slimmest climbing helmets, the bare-bones hood is lined with elastic around the face. "You have to pick either shielding your face or preserving peripheral vision, not both," notes a tester.

"I can easily ball it in one hand," says an Alaska tester.

The 7-denier nylon fabric uses high-torque (twisted) threads, which add strength without weight. We wore it in some tiny slot canyons and it held up.

The price you pay for rock-bottom weight: zero pockets.

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Ultralight obsessives and fastpackers who want the absolute lightest shell



BREATHABILITY

VENTILATION

PROTECTION



HOOD

PACKABILITY

DURABILITY

POCKETS

Rab Flashpoint . (\$325; 6.3 oz.; rab.uk.com)

The Flashpoint pulls off its ultralight, 3-layer design with a similar thin, hydrophilic PU membrane. But we found it less breathable because it lacks the venting options of the Transalper.

None, except the main front zipper.

"Insanely high level of protection for the weight," reports a Virginia tester. The Flashpoint's more generous features—longer sleeves that cinch with thin Velcro strips, a long, adjustable hem that locks out breezes—made it bomber in everything from downpours to misty, windy weather.

Fine-tune fit (over low-profile helmets) with three toggle cords (one at the back, two at the chin).

The Flashpoint packs down to the size of a large orange—just slightly bigger than the Transalper.

The Flashpoint's 7-denier nylon fabric held up well to a season of typical hiking and backpacking but, like the Transalper, it's not the best choice for serious off-trail travel or mountaineering.

You get one generous chest pocket big enough for your smartphone, keys, a folded map, and a bar.

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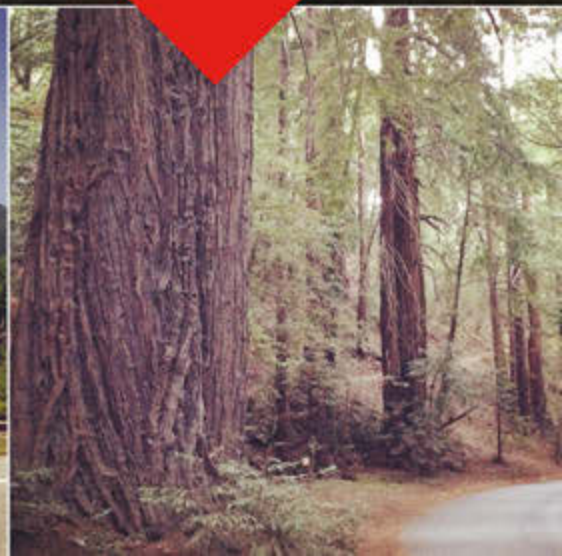
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S H E L L S

softshells



[WINDSHELL]

Salomon Fast Wing Hoodie

Why we like it A high protection-to-weight ratio makes it a no-brainer for windy trail runs and fast-and-light summit pushes.

- **Packability** Crumple up a few paper towels, hold them in one hand, and you have the rough weight and packed size of this shell. Salomon pulls it off by using a single layer of DWR-treated, 15-denier nylon.
- **Breathability** Fully zipped, the Fast Wing garnered average scores in this category. But a thin strap snaps across the sternum, holding the jacket securely in place while allowing us to unzip to mid-belly for awesome airflow without annoying flapping. Result: We could keep it on in windy conditions from the low 50s to the low 70s.
- **Features** This superlight jacket has an elastic, helmet-compatible hood and a smartphone-size chest pocket with a hole for ear buds. An elastic hem and cuffs cling tightly enough to keep wind from sneaking in.
- **Fit** It's slim, accommodating just a baselayer underneath. Extra volume around the shoulders and gussets in the armpits preserve mobility—except at the elbows, which have a narrow cut that testers found restrictive when reaching.
- **Protection** The shell is perfect for adding a touch of warmth and protection in gusty-but-dry conditions and held up well in light, intermittent rain, but the fabric wets out quickly in downpours.
- **Durability** The tissue-thin fabric requires TLC.
- \$100; 3.2 oz.; salomon.com

+ FIELD TIPS

Start cold. You'll heat up within 10 minutes of starting your hike, so resist the urge to start layered on chilly mornings. Stuff your shell in an easy-to-reach pack pocket for quick access.

[CLIMBER'S CHOICE]

Arc'teryx Psiphon SL Pullover

Why we like it This stretchy, minimalist shell is ultracomfortable for all-day wear and allows for unrestricted motion.

- **Mobility** The Psiphon's generous stretch (85 percent nylon for durability and 15 percent elastane) let us reach and twist with no binding in the arms and shoulders. Bonus: Small foam inserts on the hem physically block the shell from pulling out of a harness.
- **Breathability** Superb. We never overheated, even while climbing 5.10 on Arizona's Mt. Lemmon in 60°F temps or while hiking a loop in Colorado's Golden Gate State Park that was so hilly and steep we passed

mountain bikers pushing their rides.

- **Features** Testers loved the single-pull-adjustable, ultralight nylon hood, which fit nicely both under and over a climbing helmet. Kudos also went to the gusseted elastic cuffs, which cling closely to the wrist.
- **Protection** It adds breathable cover in gusty weather from the low 30s to low 70s, but it's definitely not a hardshell. If it rains, you need more.
- **Fit** The very slim cut made this shell somewhat difficult to pull on and off despite a long chest zip (testers said it felt comfortable once on). Consider going up a size if you prefer a looser fit.
- **Packability** The Psiphon smushes to softball size.
- \$149; 9 oz.; arcteryx.com



Fit check Make sure the sleeves still cover your wrists when you reach above your head.

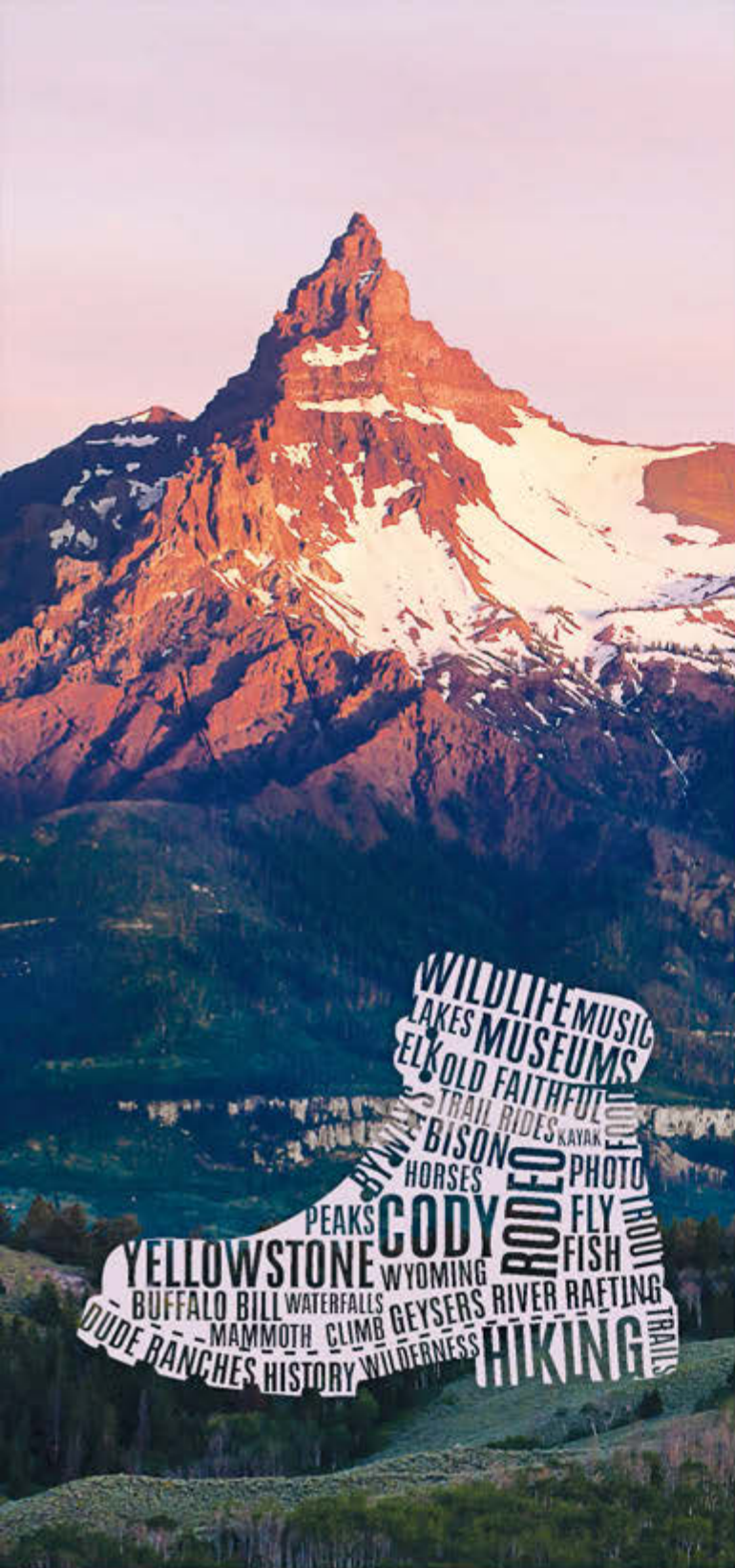
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[WATERPROOF]

Outdoor Research Allout Jacket and Pants

Why we like it You get the soft, stretchy feel of a softshell with the rain protection of a hardshell.

► **Protection** We love hiking in airy softshells, but who wants to carry another jacket for when it's raining? No such doubling up required with the Allout, which uses a three-layer proprietary membrane that proved equal to a good, all-day Northwest rain. "We had pouring rain, then snow," a tester says. "Then we had to wade through soaking brush that was over our heads. When we got back to camp, my underlayer was completely dry." And unlike other waterproof softshells we've seen, this one never got saturated and dried quickly. It also thwarted freezing winds up to 20 mph on a -1°F snowshoe in Colorado's James Peak Wilderness.

► **Breathability** The Allout is surprisingly comfortable to hike in with the vents zipped (though it's not as breathable as a conventional softshell). Breathability becomes superior when the shell's vents are open. Both the shell and pants have zippered vents on the sides (7 inches on the shell, 11 inches on the pants) that very effectively cooled testers when they were cranking hard up precipitous trails in 50°F temps.

► **Features** A fully adjustable hood with a moldable brim protects against breezes and precip. But the pockets and vents are tough to unzip, particularly with gloves on, because they extend back toward your hips at a 45-degree angle.

► **Jacket:** \$209; 14.5 oz. (m's L); **Pants:** \$169, 9.4 oz. (m's L); outdoorresearch.com



+ FIELD TIPS

Improve zipper pulls. Make tiny ones more grabbable and glove-friendly by taping a small square of folded-over duct tape to the existing pull.

PHOTOS BY COURTESY

Check layers Bring your puffy to the store and see how it fits under the shell.

S H E L L S

softshells

COMING SOON
A NEW WAY TO
WATERPROOF

Almost every shell with a waterproof/breathable membrane uses the same basic construction: a thin membrane sandwiched between a face fabric and an inner backer (or gridded half-backer). It's a tried-and-true formula, but one that uses lots of glue (which adds weight and reduces breathability) and tends to feel stiff. Later this year, VOORMI (a small Colorado apparel company) will launch a new approach: embedding a membrane *inside* a fabric's weave. The result, says the company, is a thinner, softer fabric that still rebuffs wind and wet.

"Think of it as a fleece plus weather protection," says VOORMI's Chief Marketing Officer, Timm Smith. Called Core Construction, the technology involves weaving individual yarns up and down through the membrane, like spaghetti slipping through a strainer. The process leaves millions of tiny holes in the membrane, but VOORMI says it figured out a way to strategically plug them—leaving some open to create an air-permeable, breathable garment, or sealing more for a totally waterproof fabric. This fall, look for the technology in the Access Hydro pullover (\$299) and the Drift Hydro softshell (\$399). VOORMI describes them as water-resistant layers with a fleecy feel (we haven't tested them yet). Next step: fully sealed shells for total rain protection.

[MULTISPORT]

Bergans of Norway Torfinnstind

Why we like it It's good for hiking, biking, running, and climbing, and even works as a midlayer.



► **Breathability** Protection and breathability have an inverse relationship: As one goes up, the other goes down. This shell sidesteps that tradeoff by using two different fabrics: A thicker, wind- and water-resistant material (88 percent polyester/12 percent spandex) goes on the zones most vulnerable to weather, like the front, shoulders, and tops of the arms. A thinner fabric (87 percent nylon/13 percent spandex) covers the body's hottest areas, like the back, neck, and underarms, to provide crucial venting. It kept us warm at the start of chilly trail runs, but it breathed well enough that we could keep it on into the 60s.

► **Mobility** The four-way-stretchy Torfinnstind moved with testers' every reach, pole plant, and Pulaski swing (one wore it while doing trail work). Long sleeves and an extended hem make it comfortable for mountain biking, too.

► **Fit** "Fairly snug," reports one tester, who appreciated how the slim cut didn't flap in the breeze and slid neatly under a puffy or a waterproof shell. As an outer layer, it accommodates a baselayer, but not much else.

► **Protection** "It held up well in mist and drizzle, but persistent rain quickly soaked it," says a tester, adding that the shell dried within an hour after he got caught in a fall cloudburst on the Appalachian Trail. The hoodless design saves weight, but sacrifices head and some neck protection.

► \$169; 12.7 oz. (m's L); bergans.com

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BACKPACKER'S
**FIX
IT!**
GUIDE TO GEAR REPAIR

Gear Editor Kristin Hostetter has fixed more tent poles than most people will ever own. That's one of the side-effects of testing such an enormous volume of gear each year. Learn from her experience to mend, fix, patch, unclog, and otherwise repair anything that breaks in the field.



Watch our gear editor fix a tent pole at backpacker.com/fixit.

REPAIR A SLIPPING TREKKING POLE

Collapsible poles are versatile, but when their adjustment mechanisms fail, they end up in the trash. Yours won't; you're about to learn how to care for—and fix—that vulnerable part.

→ Snap-lock poles are a piece of cake because the external adjuster is visible, and it can be tightened or loosened with a few turns of a screwdriver. If the plastic piece actually breaks, contact the manufacturer for a replacement.

→ Internal mechanisms are trickier. They can wear out or get gunked up with grit, which causes them to lose tension and slip. Overscrewing can cause them to get out of whack, too. If you're having problems, just pull out the bottom section until the expander plug is exposed. Give the threads a good scrubbing with a dry toothbrush to remove any grit, and inspect the plastic insert for signs of wear. You might need to replace the plug (contact the manufacturer), but chances are you can now just screw the section back on and you're good to go.

→ **NOTE** Don't use soap or water on your poles, as that can lead to corrosion or rust. And you shouldn't apply lubricants, either, which will just attract more grit.



UNCLOG A LIQUID-FUEL STOVE



Canister snobs, listen up: Liquid-fuel stoves are awesome. They burn hot (great for melting snow) and perform at cold temperatures and high altitudes because you can pressurize the fuel bottle as conditions change. But, unlike canister stoves, they need cleaning and troubleshooting. Keep the owner's manual packed with your stove until you've mastered these fixes.

→ **PROBLEM** You fire up your stove and the flame is erratic and yellow (see left). This generally means you have a clog somewhere.

→ **SOLUTION** Depending on your stove (check the manual) you might be able to just flip it upside-down to release an internal needle that cleans out the jet. (The jet's tiny hole converts liquid fuel into a fine, burnable mist.) Sometimes this does the trick. No dice? Move to the next step.

→ Remove the jet and soak it in some white gas. Insert the cleaning needle (they usually come with the stove; if not, buy the proper maintenance kit from the company). You can also use a toothbrush bristle or a very thin wire. Fire up the stove and see if that works. Still no?

→ Time to clean the fuel line. Grab the protruding end and work it in and out of the cable to scour the fuel line. Fire the stove up again. Still got a jumpy flame?

→ Flush the fuel line. Remove the jet and the cleaning cable, then reattach the fuel bottle. Lightly pressurize the bottle (15 or so strokes). Place the burner over a catch pan and open the control valve until about 3 or 4 teaspoons of gas drip through the stove. This thoroughly cleans out the pipes and should resolve any lingering problem. Discard gas responsibly.

PATCH TORN FABRIC

If you can sew, come over and mend our stuff. For the rest of us, here's an easy repair technique that works on tent, bag, and apparel fabric. Bonus: It's a permanent fix that doesn't hinder your gear's performance.

1. Swab the area with an alcohol wipe to remove any dirt. This improves adhesion.

2. Trim any loose threads.

3. Cut a patch of Tear-Aid Type A or Tenacious Tape that's at least ¼ inch larger than the rip on all sides. Round the edges to prevent peeling.

4. Apply the patch to the inner surface and smooth it out from the center to release any air bubbles.

5. Go the extra yard: Apply a second layer of protection. For a tear, just run a bead of Seam Grip along the patch's edges and let it cure for 24 hours. For a hole, you can apply a second patch (on the fabric's opposite side) that matches the first one in

shape and size, so that the patches touch in the center and create a stronger bond.

6. For holes larger than your hand, opt for professional repair. Try the manufacturer or Rainy Pass gear repair (rainypass.com).





BACKPACKER Fix-It Videos

Watch and learn. Gear Editor Kristin Hostetter delivers step-by-step instructions for repairing everything in your gear closet.

HOW TO

- ▶ Waterproof a jacket
- ▶ Patch a sleeping pad
- ▶ Fix a stove igniter
- ▶ Repair a zipper
- ▶ Make a boot toecap
- ▶ Repair torn tent mesh
- ▶ Seal a seam
- ▶ Build a repair kit
- ▶ **And more!**

BACKPACKER.COM/FIXIT

TREAT BOOTS

Good news: You don't have to do this very often. Bad news: If you never condition leather boots, they're not going to last. Perform this ritual once a year, or when boots look dried-out and grungy.

1. Remove the laces and toss them in the washer.
2. Fill a bucket with about a half-gallon of water and a boot cleaner like Revivex Boot

Cleaner Concentrate (mcnett.com) or a small drop of dish soap. Scrub the uppers aggressively with a toothbrush or vegetable brush. Then rinse them and air dry.

3. Treat leather with a product like Aquaseal Leather Waterproofing and Conditioner (aquaseal.com). Massage in a few thin coats with your fingers (A); let the boots sit for a few hours between coats.
4. If your boots are made of all synthetic fabric or a mix of fabric and leather, get a spray- or sponge-on treatment from

Nikwax (nikwax.com) or ReviveX (mcnett.com). Apply an even coat on the upper, wipe off any drips, and let sit overnight.

→ **Boost durability** Add a toecap. Use a piece of tape to mark off the area you want to protect—about an inch or two from the tip should do it (B). Use sandpaper to scuff up the leather a bit (helps the adhesive soak in). Clean the sanded area with rubbing alcohol. Then paint the toe with Freesole, using a little foam brush. Remove the tape in about half an hour and let the boots cure overnight.





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BACKPACKER **FIX-IT GUIDE**

FIX A BROKEN PACK BUCKLE

It's funny how a tiny, broken piece of plastic can make your shoulders ache like crazy. Say no to misery with these tips.



→ **IMPROVISE** No replacement buckle in your repair kit? Use duct tape. Here's how: If it's a broken female side, you can often maintain the integrity of the buckle with just a few wraps around the broken spot

and still get in and out of the hipbelt. If the male side is busted, you have no choice but to tape the whole thing together firmly. You'll have to cut yourself free and retape each time you remove your pack. Alternative: If the length of the webbing allows, remove the broken buckles and just knot the webbing together.

buckle on thinner webbing, but not vice versa. Get a quick-attach buckle—there are several brands on the market—because you can fasten them to webbing without sewing. Buckles with friction tabs work great for loose webbing ends; buckles with built-in slits are perfect for webbing that's sewn closed into a loop.

→ First, remove the old buckle. You might have to hack away at it with your knife. And you might only have to remove one side of the buckle, depending on the damage.

→ Slide on the new buckle.

→ **BETTER SOLUTION** Pack an aftermarket buckle (available at outdoor stores) sized to fit your particular hipbelt. They come in 1-, 1.5-, and 2-inch sizes to match different types of webbing. You can use a wider



FIX A BROKEN TENT POLE

Bad: Snapped tent poles are useless at holding up your shelter. **Worse:** The rough, sharp end will shred your tent fabric if you don't get it fixed ASAP. **Be a hero:** Always, always, always carry a tent pole repair sleeve—a simple aluminum tube sized to fit the diameter of your tent's poles. Most tents come with one, so no excuses. Here's how to use it.

1. Slip the sleeve onto the pole and center it over the break. Sometimes, the pole end might be a little mangled so that the sleeve doesn't fit over it. Use the pliers on your multitool to pinch the carnage back to round—or something remotely resembling it—then slide the sleeve on and center it over the break.

2. Duct tape the sleeve firmly in place. That's it. Send the broken pole back to the manufacturer for a replacement as soon as you get home.

No pole sleeve? Really? Use a stick or tent stake to make a splint and duct tape it into place. Use a lot of duct tape, both for strength and to protect the tent fabric from jagged metal.

FIX A WORN HEEL

The heel is often the first thing to wear out in a hiking boot, reducing traction and affecting your stride. Here's an easy way to eke some more miles out of your favorite footwear.

1. Apply a piece of tape around the perimeter of the worn heel, making a retaining wall to hold liquid rubber.

2. Stabilize the boot in an upside down position with the sole level. You can prop it up with anything—books, water bottles, whatever.

3. Squirt a generous bead of FreeSole (mcnett.com) into the cavity. Use a plastic knife or Popsicle stick to feather the adhesive into the rubber, but don't be a perfectionist because the FreeSole will level itself as it sets. Let it cure for 48 hours and you've got a new heel.



PATCH A SLEEPING PAD

A popped mattress is every backpacker's nightmare. Here's how to save your sleep.

→ **THE TOOLS** You need Seam Grip and a good adhesive patch, like Tenacious Tape (mcnett.com) or Tear-Aid Type A (tear-aid.com; don't get Type B, which only sticks to vinyl).

1. FIND THE HOLE. Slow leaks can be tough to spot. Inflate the pad as firmly as you can and submerge one end of it in still water—a pool, bathtub, puddle, lake, or an eddy in a creek. If no still water is available, pour water over the pad and look closely for bubbles. Fold over the other end of the pad to create added pressure, and be really patient and meticulous. You're looking for a little stream of bubbles and sometimes it can be hard to see. Check the whole pad, as there might be more than one leak. Mark any holes with a Sharpie or piece of duct tape. (Sorry, if the seam is leaking, you're in for a rough night's sleep.)

2. CUT A ROUND PATCH THAT GENEROUSLY COVERS THE HOLE. The patch should extend about ½ inch beyond the puncture. Remove the backing and use it as a palette to mix together some Seam Grip and a few drops of water (which helps speed the curing process). Apply the mixture to the hole, then cover it with the sticky patch. Use firm, even pressure on the patch and squeeze out any air bubbles. If a bit of Seam Grip seeps out, wipe it away. Weight the patch with a heavy rock and let it set for as long as you possibly can before inflating. In other words, if you discover a puncture, get to work first thing in the morning, while your buddies are still asleep. It should be ready for inflation by bedtime.



REBOND A BOOT SOLE

If your boots have been exposed to excessive heat—like if you've ever tried to dry them next to a campfire or blasting radiator—you might eventually run into this problem: a sole delaminating from the upper. Try to catch the problem quickly and fix it right away, because once a sole starts peeling, it's not going to stop.

→ First, wipe down both surfaces with rubbing alcohol and a clean rag to remove any dirt that can get in the way of a good seal. Fill the sole cavity with FreeSole, then join the two parts, securing them with a workshop clamp or a few turns of duct tape.

→ Some of the goo will inevitably ooze out of the sides. It's no big deal (these are hiking boots, after all), but if it bothers you, wipe it away.

"Lighten Up"

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ESSENTIALS

Backstory

Sea to Summit needed the X-Pot's handles to be strong, grabbable, and not too heavy—and to lock the lid in place so X-Mugs and X-Bowls could pack inside. Winning design: an asymmetrical shape with ridges for better grip. (See page 16.)

PHOTO BY ANDREW BYDLON

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[BARGAIN KITCHEN] Stanley Mountain Compact Cook Set

Why we like it **Smart design and easy packing make this kit a great value.**

► **Features** Solo hikers will find everything they need for backcountry cooking in this four-piece nesting set: a 24-ounce stainless steel pot; a 24-ounce insulated mug/bowl; a plastic sipper/strainer lid, which works on both pot and mug; and a folding spork.
► **Details** It's Stanley's attention to detail that makes the Mountain Compact an especially

good value. The pot handle locks securely over the whole package. Both the pot and the mug have measurement marks. Only downside: It's on the heavy side.

► \$30; 14 oz.; stanley-pmi.com



[WINDPROOF COOKER] MSR Windboiler Stove System

Why we like it **It's nearly as fast and fuel-efficient as the 2007 Editors' Choice Award-winning Reactor—but 70 percent cheaper.**

► **Output** In the time it took our companions to get their liquid-fuel stove primed, we were already drinking the coffee we'd brewed with the Windboiler's French press kit (optional: \$20; 1.3 oz.). How does it do the job for so much less money than its predecessor? Small design changes—like layers of mesh instead of metalized foam within the hockey puck-shaped burner—save money without significantly decreasing performance. The Windboiler's boil times are slightly slower and fuel consumption slightly higher than the Reactor (which is still available), but at 2.5 minutes for 20 ounces of water, only the most dedicated second-counter will notice the difference. Gripe: Though the heat adjusts lower than with the Reactor, we still found it hard to get down to a true simmer.

► **Weather resistance** The pot's aluminum "fins" protect the domed burner, enclosing the radiant heat source.

► **Bonus** The 1-liter pot is easier to get on and off the stove base than any comparable system we've used: We never splashed hot water on our hands trying to remove it.

► \$130; 15.7 oz.; msrgear.com



[EDITORS' CHOICE AWARD] Jetboil MiniMo

See the full review on page 14.

Backcountry Booze

Whatever you're drinking, you have more ways than ever to pack it. Here are three of our favorites.



[SPIRITS] Vargo Titanium Funnel Flask

Why pay this much for a booze container? If you're drinking Popov, you probably shouldn't. But top-shelf liquor deserves a top-shelf vessel, and the Funnel Flask is as swank as it gets. The 100 percent pure titanium body and lid are nonreactive—meaning they won't make your whiskey taste like metal. And they're extremely light and strong. An integrated silicone funnel helps simplify the filling process, but the mouth is narrow, so you'll still have to pour slowly. The only problem: Those 8 fluid ounces disappear fast. ► \$75; 3.7 oz.; vargoutdoors.com

[BEER] Hydro Flask True Pint

This double-wall, vacuum-insulated pint guarantees a perfect basecamping beer, no matter how sweltering the weather or how slowly you savor that stream-chilled IPA. Both on our lips and in our hands, it felt more like a regular pint glass than any insulated product we've tried (it's smaller than most insulated offerings). The thin, slanted lip also helps minimize foaming as you fill the cup. Our only gripe: The step at the bottom that helps the cups stack nicely also complicates cleaning. ► \$22; 7.3 oz.; hydroflask.com

[WINE] The Wandervino Collection by Vapur and govino

Add a little (durable) class to your camp meal with this set, which pairs Vapur's 750-ml Vintage Wine Carrier with govino's shatterproof stemless glasses. The full Carrier survived rough treatment from Colorado to Alaska with zero leaks, then disappeared in our packs once empty. At .1 ounce, the BPA-free plastic glasses are the lightest we've used, yet look classy enough for dinner parties at home. Dings: We wish the Carrier's lid was connected, and the cups are hand-wash only. ► \$20 with 2 glasses (\$25 with 4); 1 oz.; vapour.us

See Energy Sharing In A Whole **New Light**



You have a lot of gear to power so why trap your energy in one device? Introducing the **BioLite NanoGrid** - a portable system of off-grid rechargeable lighting and power storage.

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300 Lm String Lights



[BARGAIN MUG]

GSI Infinity Backpacker Mug

Why we like it **This 17-ounce cup insulates well above its \$10 price tag.**

- **Insulation** On a 33°F morning in California's John Muir Wilderness, we made tea, got distracted for more than 10 minutes, and came back expecting a tepid drink. "Then I burned my tongue," one editor says. A foam and ballistic-nylon sheath retains heat, and it's easy to grip with gloves. Bonus: The handle collapses for easy packing.
- **Cleaning** The polypropylene inner cup slips out for easy washing at home.
- **\$10; 3.5 oz.;** gsioutdoors.com



[EDITORS' CHOICE AWARD]

Sea to Summit X-Pot

See our full review on page 16.



[WATER BOTTLES]

Avex 24-ounce Brazos Autoseal Stainless

What could make us like Avex's slim, easy-to-stow shape and one-handed, push-button, leak-proof operation more? Now it's vacuum sealed and made of stainless steel, so it keeps our drinks cold for up to 20 hours.

- **\$30; 13.4 oz.;** avexsport.com

Liberty Bottleworks Topo with Navi-Cap

This screw-top bottle will keep you hydrated and on-course. The single-wall, 24-ounce aluminum bottle comes with a Brunton compass attached to the lid (and both the bottle and compass are made in the U.S.). The bottles are emblazoned with topo maps (courtesy of DeLorme); take your pick of 11 locations. Caution: Pay attention when attaching the lid; you need to line up the tabs and twist firmly for a leakproof seal.

- **\$33; 6.2 oz.;** libertybottles.com



[GADGET-CHARGING STOVE]

BioLite BaseCamp

Why we like it **Paddlers and basecampers can cook over wood while powering their electronics.**

- **Charging** Fire up the stove with small pieces of wood and tend the firebox (this is a hands-on operation). By the time you cook and eat dinner and roast s'mores (about 90 minutes), you'll get a phone's worth of juice from your hot fire. Devices can charge in real time from a USB cord when the battery's "smart dashboard" indicates an adequate charge has built up.
- **Features** The included light runs off the stove's power and kicks out plenty of lumens for food prep.
- **Cooking** With the flame diffuser on, the BaseCamp worked perfectly for grilling a dozen-plus sausages. Remove the diffuser for a concentrated furnace for boiling water or roasting marshmallows.
- **Weight** At almost 20 pounds, it's not for backpacking, but on paddling or car-camp trips you can have an endless supply of power.
- **\$299; 18 lbs.;** biolite.com

[GROUP WATER FILTER]

MSR AutoFlow

Why we like it **The beauty of gravity filters is that, well, gravity does all the work. We've tried them all, and this one is the best.**

- **Simplicity** By day two of a trip to Tahoe, every member of our 12-person group had ditched pumps and squeeze bags to fill up from this 4-liter reservoir. Hang the bag from a tree, set your bottle below, and let gravity do its thing. The filter eliminates bacteria and protozoa at 1.75 liters per minute.
- **Maintenance** Backflushing is as simple as lifting the clean-water bottle above the fill bag. A first-in-class indicator alerts you if the hollow fibers break, rendering the filter useless (read the directions).
- **Durability** The filter cylinder is fitted with rubber bumpers to protect the housing from drops, which can break hollow fibers. We manhandled the filter bag around camp, plopped it on rocks, and banged it up hanging it from branches, but never sprung a leak or suffered other damage.
- **\$120; 10.5 oz.;** msrgear.com





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ESSENTIALS

Canoeing

This starter setup costs less than \$1,300 and will last for years.

[CANOE]

1. Mad River Journey 167

Why we like it A new three-layer material makes the Journey 167 family-tough and budget-friendly.

Durability Previously, if you wanted an affordable boat that could withstand years of abuse, you looked for one made with Royalex. But that stuff's not available anymore. Mad River's replacement: Triple Tough, a three-layer polyethylene skin/foam material they engineered. Two layers of protective polyethylene skin sandwich the foam core, which provides flotation and stiffness. The only knock: The material is a tad heavy.

Performance Consider the Journey an SUV of canoes: very stable. But that doesn't mean slow. During testing on Colorado's Steamboat Lake, the Journey's waterline (hull length) proved long enough to maintain speed.

Capacity At 16 feet and 7 inches, it has room for two adults, a dog, and plenty of gear. \$1,005; 88 lbs.; madrivercanoe.com

[DRY BAG]

2. SealLine Boundary Portage Pack

Why we like it Portages are easier with this giant, tough, leakproof gear-hauler.

Carrying comfort When you need to portage your gear more than a quarter-mile or so, you want a bag you can haul like a backpack. The Boundary comes with a removable suspension system designed for medium-size torsos (around 18 inches). We filled the bag to 30 pounds and the carrying system eased gear-hauling immensely (though we wished for a thicker waistbelt).

Protection We submerged ours and the vinyl bag kept everything dry. Available in 35-, 70-, and 115-liter sizes. 115L: \$120; 3 lbs. 6 oz.; seallinegear.com

[MAP CASE]

3. SealLine HP Waterproof Map Case

Why we like it Keep your maps and permits dry and organized in these clear urethane cases.

Convenience The hook-and-loop roll-down closure is easy to operate, and corner lash tabs and an adjustable neck strap allow for flexible options when it comes to securing it to boat or body. Available in three sizes. M: \$35; 5 oz.; seallinegear.com

[PADDLE]

4. Bending Branches Loon 54

Why we like it It's exactly what an entry-level paddle should be: simple, light, and affordable.

Performance The all-wood construction features five laminates of basswood and maple, used for their high strength-to-weight ratios. Available in five lengths between 51 and 63 inches, the Loon's 6.75-by-20-inch blade blends power with a light swing weight, while the oval shaft and palm-grip felt at home in our hands. Size it right: Place the grip between your legs while seated; the shaft/blade intersection should be at your forehead. \$75; 22 oz.; bendingbranches.com

[PFD]

5. Harmony Genesis

Why we like it Get flotation and fit without spendy extras.

Fit This no-frills, front-zip PFD provides full-range arm and shoulder movement. Two adjustable shoulder- and side-cinch straps let us customize the fit to accommodate everyone from mid-size adults to skinny teens.

Features Breathable mesh siding kept us cool, and the offset shoulder buckle didn't rub against the gunwale when we were portaging canoes. Two pleated zip pockets (with drain holes) hold sunscreen or snacks. \$70; 2 lbs.; harmonygear.com

Staff pick Stave off trail stink with a resealable pack of Wilderness Wipes (\$5); they're premoistened with aloe and vitamin E. seatosummit.com

ESSENTIALS

accessories



[FIRESTARTER/LACES] Rattlerstrap Flint Laces

Why we like it **These multitasking boot laces conceal an emergency firestarter.**

► **Feature** Get two ways to light a fire. Use the lace to make a fire bow (hard), or remove the thin, 1-inch ferro rod from the aglet (the hard tip at the end of the laces) and scrape it to create sparks (easier). Duct tape the ferro rod back in place when you're done, and walk on.

► \$14; 1 oz. (comes in 8 sizes); rattlerstrap.com



[PACKABLE CHAIR] Therm-a-Rest Treo

Why we like it **Comfort comes in a small package.**

► **Packability** While a bit heavy for all but the shortest backpacking trips, it's ideal for car camping. The tripod base transforms into a convenient, hard-

plastic carrying case the size of a Nalgene. In fact, it makes such a tidy package, throw it in the trunk and leave it there for Little League games. It assembles in a snap.

Comfort We found it stable, and because it sits about 13 inches off the ground, it's easy to get in and out of.

► \$99; 2 lbs. 4 oz.; cascadedesigns.com



[KNEE BRACE] Zamst JK-2

Why we like it **Say goodbye to pounding knee pain on downhills.**

► **Support** You may not have ever torn your ACL or had knee surgery, but you still get

throbbing pangs in your knees when descending on the trail and the dull soreness afterward. Sound familiar? Enter the JK-2, a knee brace specifically designed to support the patella. This lightweight brace holds the kneecap in place when you're in motion, dissipating pressure on your tendons. The result: no soreness.

► **Adjustability** The brace opens flat and then folds around your knee like a taco, fastening with Velcro.

► \$70; 6.1 oz. (M); zamst.us



[HEATED CHAIR] Brunton Hot Seat

Why we like it **Take the chill off while taking a load off.**

► **Warmth** Ever ridden in a car with heated seats? That's what the Hot Seat is, but for camp. It's part of Brunton's new Heatsync collection, with integrated warmers that run off USB power (pair it with Brunton's Revolt 9000 battery pack, sold separately; \$100). And given the number of areas with fire restrictions, it's a godsend on cold nights. Choose from three settings (high is toasty at 131°F, but only lasts about six hours with a 9000mAh Revolt).

► \$100; 2 lbs. 2 oz.; brunton.com



[TREKKING POLES] Black Diamond Trail Pro Shock

Why we like it **Take the sting out of the most rugged trails.**

► **Shock absorption** In most poles, the shock-absorbing mechanism is in the lower shaft, which can create a springy bounce-back when you plant. Black Diamond uses a four-part system in the grip instead. Three tiny dampeners are stacked just below the handle with a rebound-control mechanism located high up in the shaft. Result: shock absorption without any pogoing.

► **Adjustability** These three-section poles telescope down to 24 inches (women's version) via BD's FlickLocks, which adjust easily on the fly, even when you're wearing gloves. Men's sizing: 27 to 55 inches. Women's: 24 to 49 inches.

► \$140; 1 lb. 4 oz. (m's); blackdiamondequipment.com



[EDITORS' CHOICE AWARD] Princeton Tec Sync

See page 24 for the full review.



[ADVENTURE LUGGAGE] Granite Gear 32" Wheeled Duffel

Why we like it **Roll it around or throw it on your back; this monster can handle any load.**

► **Ergonomics** Lots of rolling duffels have packstraps, but most are either bulky and obtrusive or skimpy and uncomfortable. This bag borrows from Granite Gear's technical pack-building cred with supportive, contoured shoulder straps and a lightly padded, curve-hugging hip-belt, both of which tuck away on the front of the pack.

► **Capacity** At 131 liters, you could pack a toddler in here and still fit clothes for a week.

► **Durability** Tough, 600-denier nylon remains unscathed despite months of hauling the bag—loaded with up to 60 pounds—around the globe. Corners are reinforced, and we love the beefy grab handles on every side of the bag. Only gripe: It's heavy.

► \$199; 12 lbs.; granitegear.com

ESSENTIALS

sunglasses

[BEST INTERCHANGEABLE]

1. Smith Pivlock Arena Max

Why we like It **Get great coverage with an idiot-proof changing mechanism.**

► **Coverage** Usually “medium fit” means “medium coverage.” Not with these specs, which offer superior protection for the size. The lens extends from above the brow to below the cheekbone, fully wrapping the sides of your eyes, almost like glacier glasses. (For smaller faces, we recommend the Asana, which offers the same huge protection.)

► **Lenses** You get three (dark, rose, and clear are standard); for the dark, we liked the Red Sol-X Mirror, a true gray lens with a red mirror that blocks 89 percent of visual light and repels water, dirt, and grease.

► **Changing** It isn’t new, but the Pivlock lens swapping mechanism is still one of the best in class: Twist the arms up to unlock and remove, pull the nosepiece off, switch the lens, reattach the hardware.

► \$159 (includes three lenses); 1 oz.; smithoptics.com

[ECO PICK]

2. Proof Ontario Wood

Why we like It **Go green with these customizable wayfarers.**

► **Materials** Not only are these bamboo frames more environmentally friendly than the plastics used to make most sunglasses, but “they’re super-light and still smell like a forest after a year of wear, which keeps the hiking stoke high,” says a tester.

► **Lenses** Proofs are customizable, allowing you to select a frame style, frame material, and lens in the online store. We liked the mirrored green “Kush” lens, which enables natural colors to pop. The dark polarized lens tested well in bright light.

► **Coverage** They let light in the periphery; best for casual use.

► \$90-\$130 (depending on lens); 1.1 oz.; iwantproof.com

[BEST LENS]

3. Julbo Venturi

Why we like It **These photochromatic lenses adapt to anything.**

► **Lens tech** Julbo’s Zebra lens transforms from a golden-clear (42 percent light transmission) to a dark copper (7 percent) in just 28 seconds. The former is great for low-light days, while the latter is exceptional in bright sun. “They protect my eyes from the bright morning sun, but as soon as the thunderheads rolled in, they adjust.” Gravy: effective anti-fog coating.

► **Durability** Not only do the lenses change tint, but they’re bulletproof. Really: Julbo uses NXT, a material also used to make helicopter windshields and motorcycle helmet visors, so needless to say, they’re durable. “Sit on them, stow them in the bottom of your pack, drop them off a granite crag, they’re bomber,” one tester says.

► **Fit** Designed with trail runners in mind, grip is supreme.

► \$180; 1.1 oz.; julbousa.com

Happy Lenses

Can your shades actually lift your mood?

Some lenses change color, some repel dirt, some swap out, but only one makes you happier. SPY’s new Happy Lenses are engineered to allow the sun’s long-wave blue light to penetrate through to your eye (while still blocking the harmful short-wave light). Research shows that long-wave blue rays boost the brain’s production of serotonin, a hormone responsible for regulating mood, among other things. So, by allowing just this type of light through, Spy claims the Happy Lens makes the wearer, well, happier. Our testers were split on the claim. “Sure, I was really happy, but I had also just bagged a sweet peak, so how can you tell?” one wondered.

► Prices vary depending on frame; spyoptic.com/happy

Staff pick Get Colorado’s favorite uber-spicy coffee-shop chai in backcountry-friendly teabags (\$10 for 14). bhaktichai.com

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FOOTWEAR

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- 16. ECCO** eccousa.com
- 17. KEEN, INC** KEEN footwear, for trails, water, and all the places in between. (800) 590-5336; keenfootwear.com
- 18. LA SPORTIVA** sportiva.com
- 19. LOWA** Outdoor boots and shoes from Germany. lowaboos.com
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- 46. KAHTOOLA INC** Kahtoola MICROspikes Traction System—multipurpose, pocket-sized ice traction gear. (866) 330-8030; kahtoola.com
- 47. KOMPERDELL SPORTARTIKEL AMBH** Made in Austria: poles (trekking, racing, towing, carbon), gloves, underwear. 3 year warranty. komperdell.com
- 48. LEKI** LEKI "Trekology"—the right technology and lifetime warranty. leki.com
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- 50. MOUNTAIN HARDWEAR** Mountain Hardwear—gear that performs when you need it most. mountainhardwear.com
- 51. MOUNTAINSMITH** mountainsmith.com
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- 54. OSPREY PACKS INC** Since 1974 Osprey Packs has created innovative, high performance gear that reflects a love of adventure and a devotion to the outdoors. (866) 284-7830; ospreypacks.com
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- 60. TAMRON** tamron.com
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- 63. HARBOR FREIGHT TOOLS** Quality tools at ridiculously low prices. (800) 423-2567; harborfreight.com

NON-PROFIT

- 64. WILDERNESS VOLUNTEERS** Weeklong adventure service trips in cooperation with public land agencies. wildernessvolunteers.org

ESSENTIALS

Rock Climbing

Start right with this bargain kit assembled by the editors of *Climbing* magazine.

[HELMET]

1. Black Diamond Vector

Why we like it This brain bucket is so lightweight and sleek you'll actually want to wear it.

Performance Foam covered by a polycarbonate shell absorbs impacts and protects the noggin, while an easily adjustable rear harness system holds it in place. **Fit** It's so light, airy, and comfy we had no reason to take it off, even while belaying. Two sizes. \$100; 8.1 oz. (S/M); blackdiamondequipment.com

[HARNESSES]

2. CAMP Energy

Why we like it It's the perfect entry-level harness.

Performance The Energy's slim profile didn't interfere when we pulled awkward moves on the wall, but it has just enough padding to take the sting out of falls.

Adjustability The quick-closing buckle on the waist is automatically double-backed, which adds a key level of safety for beginners. Leg loops are fixed but adjustable: We wore it with shorts for summer sending and over layers for ice climbing.

Price A harness with such a modern design and great features usually costs twice as much as this one does. \$50; 11 oz.; camp-usa.com

[ROCK SHOE]

3. La Sportiva Jeckyl VS

Why we like it This durable shoe is comfortable all day long.

Performance A mostly flat design makes them comfy, and an ever-so-slight downturn allows you to toe-in on tiny nubbins on vertical routes.

Features Two Velcro straps make them easy on, easy off. Relatively thick but super-sticky rubber (5mm Vibram XS Edge) combined with a semi-rigid midsole provides support and stability for overworked feet.

Perforations in the leather upper boost breathability—and let us avoid climber-foot stank.

\$120; 15.6 oz.; sportiva.com

[ROPE]

4. Petzl Contact 9.8

Why we like it Get top-notch durability, handling, and versatility.

Performance The Contact was soft and supple from day one: easy to clip, effortless to knot, and smooth-running through every type of belay device we tried. And even after a month of heavy use, it hasn't fuzzed up (a common issue with ropes).

Diameter The 9.8mm diameter is ideal for both experienced lead climbers and beginner climbers who prefer to toprope. It's durable, but still light (7.9 pounds for a 60-meter rope).

Middle mark A clearly visible middle mark makes the Contact great for multipitch climbs and descents involving a rappel. \$215 (60m); petzl.com

[BELAY DEVICE]

5. Black Diamond ATC-Guide

Why we like it This standard tube-style device has an auto-blocking mode.

Features Every climber should have a tube-style device: Use them for belaying and rappelling. The ATC-Guide offers two friction modes (one side is standard; flip it over for extra friction, when you're learning to belay). Plus, it works with almost any size rope. The auto-block allows you to set this device up on the anchor, then belay your following climber, which adds a lot of stopping power.

\$30; 3.1 oz.; blackdiamond-equipment.com



ESSENTIALS

knives



[SURVIVAL BLADE]

1. Self Reliance Outfitters Bush Knife

Why we like it **Get badass style and solid performance at a great price.**

► **Durability** Over six months, we used it to chop, baton, slice, and (though you're not supposed to) pry, and with a little regular maintenance, it's ready for more. The 1/8-inch-thick, full-tang blade (it extends all the way through the handle) is made for abuse. When we batoned it with the back of an axe head, the convex blade wedged wood open while the curly maple handle dampened vibrations. The edged spine scrapes sparks off a ferro rod (included with the leather sheath; \$37; 4.4 oz.).

► \$65; 9.8 oz.; selfrelianceoutfitters.com

[MULTITOOL]

2. Victorinox EvoGrip 18

Why we like it **It's a do-all, ergonomically designed multitool.**

► **Features** This classic do-everything knife has a complete suite of tools (11 in

all). The contoured and textured grip provides a solid hold for all kinds of repair work (we used the saw to process tinder, the scissors to cut patches, and the bottle opener to pry a finicky headlamp open). And we like that the 2.5-inch blade locks (many tools in this category lack this safety feature). Annoying: Tools are tough to engage unless you have strong fingernails.

► \$57; 3.3 oz.; victorinox.com

[EVERYDAY CARRY]

3. CRKT Cobia

Why we like it **This blade is fast to open, secure, and precise to use.**

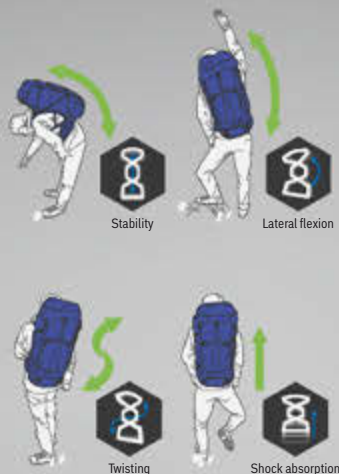
► **Control** The 3-inch locking blade offers precision cuts, and a second choil (index-finger notch) allows you to choke up for supreme control for whittling, slicing cord, preparing food, or any other light-duty uses. Bonus: Its stainless-steel construction means you can pop it in the dishwasher for easy cleanup. Ding: Sorry, lefties, the quick-draw opening mechanism is designed for right hands only.

► \$130; 2.5 oz.; crkt.com



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OF NORWAY

bergans.com



[PANTS]
Kühl Radikl Pants

Why we like it **Smartly placed stretch panels and a soft cotton blend mean crazy comfort.**

- **Comfort** Kühl stitched in strips of 88 percent nylon and 12 percent spandex (nylon has natural stretch, too) along the outside of each pant leg, under the kneecaps, and around the rear pockets, resulting in unprecedented range of motion. From the Sierras to Peru, we scrambled off-trail and could easily high step from boulder to boulder.
- **Durability** The cotton/nylon/spandex blend boosts comfort and durability (although it slows dry times). One of our more brutish testers—a photographer who shreds a few pairs of pants per season—wore the Radikl for five months of Colorado Front Range adventures and came through with the pants' knees and seat intact (though he worked holes into the stretch panels).
- **Features** Three pairs of generous pockets—in front, back, and on the thighs—easily fit maps, knives, lip balm, and sunscreen.
- \$90; 1 lb. (32x32); kuhl.com



EDITORS' CHOICE AWARD
Outdoor Research Deviator Hoody

Read the the review on page 24.



[HOT-WEATHER HIKING]
Columbia Cascades Explorer Long Sleeve Shirt

Why we like it **Stay comfortable even when the temps are close to 100°F.**

- **Protection** The UPF 30 shirt proved ideal during five days of hiking and boating in the hot, humid, and buggy Amazon. The collar unfolds twice for extra sun coverage, and a vented mesh panel across the upper back kept us from overheating in temps upward of 95°F. The tight weave of the fabric prevents bugs from biting through.
- **Trail life** Shirts typically start feeling crunchy after a few days of constant sweat and dry cycles. But the Explorer remained presentable after a week, thanks to Omni-Shield, which uses a proprietary method for integrating the DWR with the fabric for better resistance to moisture and grime.
- **Features** Two front chest pockets are large enough for an energy bar or a passport, and the hem has a small triangular microfiber patch for cleaning lenses.
- **Fit** The slightly relaxed—but not sloppy—shape maximizes airflow.
- \$50; 8 oz. (M); columbia.com

[QUICK-DRYING SHIRT]
SmartWool Routt County Tee



Why we like it **It feels like your favorite five-year-old tee but has the performance chops of a technical hiking shirt.**

- **Moisture management** Our Northwest editor spends as much time in wet weather as anyone, and he raved about

the capabilities of this T-shirt. "I was shoulder deep in pools of water in Oregon's Louse Canyon, and 10 minutes later I felt dry." SmartWool blends merino with Tencel, a natural fiber that comes from sustainably harvested wood pulp and has notably better drying time than plain wool. Tencel also adds luxe cushiness; the Routt feels like super-soft cotton.

- **Durability** For six months, we wore this fine-looking shirt everywhere from South America to the Sierras, and it still looks good as new, with zero pilling.
- \$75; 6 oz. (L); available in a women's version, the Graphic Faded Mountain; smartwool.com



[VERSATILE JACKET]
Millet Hybrid Langtang

Why we like it **It packs a lot of warmth into a pint glass-size package.**

- **Warmth for weight** The Langtang kept us toasty on summer peakbagging trips (as a stand-alone) and in subfreezing, shoulder-season hikes (under a shell), thanks to the 700-fill duck down in the chest and back. But the stretch-polyester sleeves mean it offers better breathability than a full down jacket during high-output activities. Pertex Quantum shell fabric covers the core and resists light precip.
- **Durability** The two-way stretch arm fabric has great range of motion for scrambling, and it's tougher than it looks. "The sleeves were undamaged after some of my more inelegant moves that involved jamming my arm into cracks," says one tester after a climbing trip in Colorado.
- **Features** The hood is the same uninsulated stretch material and provides adequate protection from wind on gusty ridgelines, but you'll want to add a beanie in chilly conditions.
- \$199; 13 oz. (m's M); millet.fr



[SOCKS]

Balega Blister Resist Crew Socks

Why we like it **Slick fibers thwart blisters.**

► **Anti-blister True story:** Halfway through a weekend trip near Colorado's Kebler Pass, one tester got the worst friction blister of his life and could feel another one starting on his other foot. He swapped his socks out for these Balegas and averted the impending crisis. Credit the superfine goat mohair fibers that create a friction-free barrier between foot and shoe. Plus, the mohair is interwoven with Balega's

moisture-wicking polyester fibers.

► **Fit** The elastic band around the midfoot and a deep heel pocket help the sock maintain shape during extended use, as we discovered after wearing them for five days straight in the eastern Sierras. Also available in quarter-height and no-show. Bonus: sweet price.

► \$15; 1.8 oz.; balega.com

[COMFORTABLE UNDERWEAR]

Saxx Kinetic Boxer

Why we like it **They're performance boxer briefs with the support of a jock strap.**

► **Comfort** We've received some remarkable tester feedback over the years, but this sets a new standard: "It feels like there's an angel in my briefs, offering gentle support." That exceptional assistance comes from the articulated "front pouch" and the vertical mesh panels that flank either side. The vents also promote side-to-side airflow.

► **Details** The pinhole mesh throughout is ultra-breathable, the 1.5-inch-thick waistband doesn't bunch up under pack hipbelts, and the 85/15 nylon/spandex blend received high marks for retaining its shape after five nonstop days in Utah's Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Bonus: They don't stink after extended use.

► \$37; 3 oz. (M); XS-XXL; saxxunderwear.com



[SUN SHIRT]

Helly Hansen Fraser Shirt

Why we like it **It's a fully featured sun shirt with clean, casual styling.**

► **Features** Where do we start? Lightweight and stain-resistant, this UPF 50+ shirt earned praise for wicking and drying: "After a 5-mile hike with a 35-pound pack in the middle of the day, the part of my back that was under my pack was wet, but it dried within minutes at camp," one of our sweatiest testers said. Yes, the stretchy polyester is quick to dry, but also credit the mesh-lined

back yoke, which effectively vents (when not under a pack). We appreciated other touches, too, like the expandable sun collar and double chest pockets with drainage holes. It comes in shortsleeve, too.

► \$80 (\$70 for shortsleeve); 7 oz. (L); S-XXL; hellyhansen.com

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Staff pick Jersey Shore Sun Mongongo Organic Lip Conditioner (\$5.50, jerseyshoresun.com)



[VERSATILE MIDLAYER]
Eider Wooly Hoodie

Why we like it It showcases the best qualities of both wool and polyester.

► **Fabric Blend** Two fabrics, get both of their strengths? It's a popular idea these days, and Eider's version involves a single-layer, bi-face fabric with strategically placed polyester and wool fibers. Poly on the inside of the full-zip jacket helped wick sweat and dried quickly as we charged uphill in temps ranging from 25 to 55°F. The outer layer of wool made the Hoodie cozy for hanging around camp in temps down to the mid-50s. And it's got staying power: "After several days of abuse in the mountains," reports a NOLS instructor, "I pulled this jacket from the bottom of my pack and took it straight to the city—no smells, no wrinkles."

► **Features** We loved the hood for windy summits, and it slides easily under a climbing helmet. The two zippered hand pockets are big enough for a bar and some sunscreen, but they never irritated us under pack straps. Nitpick: It took some adjusting to keep the hood cords from bouncing in our faces when we were fully snuggled in and moving.

► \$150; 8.6 oz.; eider.com



[TECH TEE]
Terramar Reflex SS Scoop

Why we like it This affordable tee sets the bar for good looks—and is available in plus sizes (up to 3X).

► **Fit** Testers of all sizes appreciated the shirt's flattering details, including a past-the-hips cut, slimming vertical stitching on the front, and a rounded hem that splits at the hips. But the Reflex doesn't just coast on its good looks: That longer hem stays put under a hipbelt, while the scoop neck was high enough to be comfy under a sternum strap.

► **Fabric** The 19 percent elastane in the fabric (the rest is polyester) is a finer denier than regular Lycra, which means it's softer and dries faster while still adding scramble-worthy stretch. An antimicrobial coating allowed us to wear it for long weekends in the desert without offending campmates.

► \$40; 6 oz. (M); terramarsports.com

Backcountry Unmentionables

Our favorite trail undies of the year



[SUPPORTIVE BRA]
Moving Comfort Hot Shot

Small-chested testers (B-cup and below) found themselves reaching for the polyester Hot Shot all season for activities ranging from yoga to weeklong backpacking trips to runs. The wide, stretchy straps stayed put in all circumstances and never chafed under a pack, while the double layer of fabric dried quickly enough that we didn't freeze during sweaty Fourteener climbs. The pull-on simplicity means no moving pieces to poke at us or break. The sweetheart gathering at the center is more flattering than a typical bra (we ditched the removable pads for the backcountry, but liked that option for around town).

► \$42; 2.5 oz.; brooksrnning.com/moving-comfort



[PERFORMANCE SKIVVIES]
ExOfficio Give-N-Go Women's Sport Mesh

These undies (both the bikini and hipkini styles) won over every female staffer. "They're my favorite for done-in-a-day, high-output hikes because they really do breathe better than others I've tried," one says. That's thanks to the Sport Mesh fabric, which uses extra-smooth nylon yarn to help eliminate micro-pockets where moisture could get trapped and features a pointelle mesh with tiny holes that promote airflow. And an unusual construction method—large, folded fabric hems at the waistband and leg holes push the flat seams "inland" a bit—really elevates comfort. Ding: They ripen quickly.

► \$22; 1 oz.; exofficio.com

Staff pick A zip-top bag works as a trail wallet, but the Minimalist (\$8, flowfold.com)—made from sail cloth scraps—is a more elegant solution.

[BEST PANTS]

**Mountain Hardwear
Dynama Pant**

Why we like it **These are comfier than pajamas yet worthy on the trail.**

► **Fabric** The knit poly waistband dried quickly after sweaty slogs in 80°F temps in Death Valley National Park, while the supple, stretch-woven nylon body fabric helped cut light wind over a baselayer at 10,000 feet in Colorado's James Peak Wilderness.

► **Versatility** On a road trip around Southern California, we wore these pants for four days straight of hard hiking with a loaded pack. Then we changed into some other, cleaner hiking pants. Then we changed back into the dirty ones for an overnight. Only two things keep them short of perfect: We wished for more, deeper pockets than the jeans-style ones at the front and back (though that might decrease the comfort factor), and after about 50 days of hard use, we've noticed some moderate pilling on the thighs.

► \$70; 5 oz. (M); mountainhardwear.com

[COMPRESSION SOCKS]

**VIM & VIGR Women's Wool
Compression Socks**

Why we like it **These lightly cushioned socks wick well and compress to speed recovery.**

► **Compression** The wool-nylon-spandex fabric incorporates a small amount of rubber (we couldn't feel it) to maintain graduated compression. They hugged our calves without feeling constricting and wicked sweat during summer trail runs.

► \$35; 4 oz. (M); vimvigr.com



[WATER-RESISTANT INSULATION]

**Black Diamond Access
LT Hybrid Hoodie**

Why we like it **This super-breathable, water-resistant puffy—launched last year but now available in a women's version—is ideal for high-exertion climbs.**

► **Performance** PrimaLoft Gold insulation in the body and arms kept us warm down to 25°F during low-effort hikes, while stretchy underarm side panels dumped excess heat. In light snow, we got lazy about putting on a hardshell because the DWR-treated Pertex Quantum shell fabric shed moisture and the synthetic fill stayed lofty in wet conditions.

► **Fave feature** The hood cinches with an elastic cord to create a cozy, windproof scarf effect around your face.

► \$149; 13.8 oz. (S); blackdiamondequipment.com

A woman in a red and blue climbing suit is climbing a snowy mountain peak. She is using Komperdell carbon poles. The background shows a vast, snowy mountain range under a clear sky.

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A close-up of the Power Lock 3.0 external lock on a carbon pole, showing its red and black components.

POWER LOCK 3.0

A logo celebrating Komperdell's 30th anniversary, featuring a large number '3' and the text '30 Years 1985-2015'.

ESSENTIALS

cameras

[BEST ALL-AROUND]

Canon PowerShot G16

Why we like it You get DSLR quality images in a compact, 12MP point-and-shoot package.

► **Features** Full manual controls are quick and easy to adjust, and a high-quality 5x optical (28mm-140mm) zoom allowed testers to capture hard-to-see shots. "I was 120 feet above my partner on a climb, and I zoomed all the way in so I could catch the subtleties of her expression," one tester says. Bonus: The neutral density filter option lets you create striking motion-blur effects and reduce depth of field on bright sunny days to emphasize your subject matter.

► **Durability** The G16's solid construction kept it running smoothly, even after getting routine dings on climbs in Chamonix, the Rockies, and the Tetons.

► \$500; 11.1 oz.; usa.canon.com

[MOST VERSATILE]

Sony a5100

Why we like it This mirrorless camera has the ability to change lenses, giving you more creative control—and it's more packable than a DSLR.

► **Versatility** In addition to its interchangeable lens system, the compact camera features an APS-C sensor (24MP)—the same type used in most DSLRs. The result? We snapped DSLR-rivalling images—and shot full HD video—without hauling the additional weight and bulk of a larger camera. The a5100 improves on previous versions with a faster auto-focus system and broader ISO range (100 to 25,600), which let us capture crisp action shots and low-light scenes.

► **Ergonomics** The 3-inch-wide touchscreen LCD display flips up 180 degrees, making it a cinch to take perfectly framed selfies.

► \$700 (includes 16mm-50mm lens); 12 oz.; sony.com

[PRO PICK]

Nikon D750

Why we like it You don't have to be a pro to covet the D750's impressive features.

► **Features** The D750 garnered high praise for its full-frame 24MP sensor (the same dimensions as 35mm film) and compact shape, which is half a pound lighter than its predecessor and one of the lightest full-frame DSLRs out there. The D750 excels at capturing continuous shots at 6.5 frames per second with a 51-point autofocus system, which keeps moving subjects in focus across a wide portion of the frame. Plus, low-light scenes are easy to nail thanks to the broad ISO range (100 to 12,800). Want to shoot from high or low angles? The 3.2-inch LCD screen flips up 135 degrees or down 90 degrees, making it easier to frame the shot.

► \$2,300 (body only); 1 lb. 10 oz.; nikonusa.com

[BARGAIN LENS]

Tamron 16mm-300mm f/3.5-6.3 Di II VC PZD Macro

Why we like it This all-in-one lens is lighter—and has a larger zoom range—than its predecessor (which we've long loved).

► **Versatility** Not interested in schlepping multiple bulky lenses into the backcountry? We appreciate the Tamron's wide-ranging 18.8x optical zoom with macro focusing, which could shoot everything from vast landscapes and distant wildlife to the water droplet on a leaf. "You're basically getting two lenses—a wide-angle and a telephoto—for the price of one," our photo editor says. Tradeoff: It's a slower lens (f/3.5-6.3), which can make shooting in low-light conditions more challenging.

► \$630; 1 lb. 3 oz.; tamron-usa.com



PHOTOS BY ANDREW BYDLON (LEFT); COURTESY. TEXT BY KIM PHILLIPS

Staff pick Brunton's ingenious Power Knife (\$30, brunton.com) houses USB, micro-USB, and Apple connectors in a slick package that looks like a multitool.

GPS



[FULLY LOADED]

Garmin GPSMAP 64st

Why we like it **It's rugged, reliable, and comes with preloaded maps.**

► **Reception** Even under thick, sky-blocking forest canopies, the 64st proved infallible. We recorded lightning-quick (15 to 60 seconds) satellite fix times.

► **Preloaded maps** The unit is ready for the trail with 1:100K topo maps of the entire U.S.

► **Communication** Hiking within cell range? The new LiveTrack function allows friends and family to view your activities in real time on the Garmin Connect website.

► \$350; 8.1 oz. (with batteries); garmin.com

[WATCH]

Garmin fenix 2

Why we like it **The long-lasting battery makes it easy to collect a wealth of data.**

► **Performance** Like its predecessor the fenix, which won an Editors' Choice Award in 2013, the fenix 2 has an impressively user-friendly interface and accurate GPS tracking. But this version has even more multisport functionality (geared toward running, swimming, and skiing). We routinely locked into satellites in less than a minute and found activity stats easy to read on the 1.2-inch-diameter LCD screen.

► **Backcountry cred** In addition to its altimeter, barometer, and three-axis electronic compass, the fenix 2 can record and store up to 100 tracks and mark up to 1,000 waypoints.

► **Battery life** The lithium-ion battery far outperformed the previous iteration. With the GPS on and tracking every five minutes, we got about a day and a half of functionality before the unit needed to be recharged.

► **Nitpick** It's bulky for the small-wristed.

► \$400; 3 oz.; garmin.com

Portable Power

3 ways to stay charged



[WEATHERPROOF CHARGING SYSTEM]

Goal Zero Venture 30 Solar Kit

During months of testing, we dropped it onto rocks (from about 5 feet) and dunked it in puddles—but it never faltered. The unit's weatherproof design features two high-speed USB ports that are sealed against water and particulates by a patent-pending process (no protective plugs necessary). Plus, the Venture (7,800mAh) comes with flat, rubber-wrapped USB and micro USB charging cables that fit into the grooved edges of the charger. It takes five hours to power up from the wall, which gave us 3.5 charges for the iPhone 4s. Planning a longer trip? Juice the Venture in the field by connecting it to the included Nomad 7 solar panel for nine hours in full sun. \$169; 1 lb. 6 oz.; goalzero.com



[HIGH-POWERED CHARGER]

iBattz Mojo BattStation Optimus 20400

This 20,400 mAh brick (it's exactly the size of an iPhone 6, but $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick) is ideal for people going out for more than a weekend but who don't want to fuss with solar. The Optimus kept two smartphones alive for more than a week's worth of hikes, bike rides, and road trips—that's 10 complete iPhone 4 charges. Credit the efficient, automotive-grade battery cells—the same ones used in Tesla's electric cars. \$130; 12.7 oz.; ibattz.com



[BARGAIN CHARGER]

Anker 2nd Gen Astro 6400

For the size and weight of an energy bar (and the cost of a box of them), you get 6,400 mAh (enough for four iPhone 4 charges). Bonus: A circular LED display shows the unit's remaining battery life in 10 percent increments. \$26; 4.8 oz.; ianker.com



New for 2015

Mountain Dome Tents

Outdoor Gear

Forged
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[DINNER]

MaryJanesFarm Outpost Cheddar Herb Pasta

This isn't Kraft. Instead, the thick, warm comfort of sharp white cheddar and Parmesan cheeses mix with sage, rosemary, and thyme to create a decadent sauce. "This is real comfort food, and it really hits the spot if you're hiking hard or facing a bitter cold adventure," said one tester after spending a late-fall night out in the Mojave Desert. To prepare, just add $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of boiling water to the resealable bag, then wait 10 minutes. In order to beef up the calorie count of each serving (290 calories), some testers added tuna or slices of salami.

► \$6.50 (1.5 servings);
4.4 oz.; maryjanesfarm.org

Alpine Aire Burrito Bowl

Although a bit boring on its own, this concoction of freeze-dried beans, rice, corn, and bell pepper can form the basis of a great Mexican feast. Pack the rice mixture inside a warm tortilla with slices of avocado, cheese, and a shot of Tabasco to make a tasty burrito (and boost calorie count). Tip: Add $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ cup extra boiling water to make the rice mix sticky enough for rolling inside a tortilla. Comes in beef, veggie, and chicken varieties.

► \$5.95-\$8.50 (2 servings);
6 oz.; alpineaire.com  

Backpacker's Pantry Beef Pho

This Vietnamese dish consists of broth, linguine-shaped rice noodles, herbs, and meat with packets of lime juice powder and sriracha sauce for a nice flavor punch. "It's like spicy beef ramen—but 100 times better," said one tester after wolfing down a big bowl on a chilly night in John Muir Wilderness (California). The salty broth tends to sink to the bottom of the pouch, so best to eat it out of bowls.

► \$8.50 (2 servings); 4.6 oz.;
backpackerspantry.com



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Patagonia Provisions Tsampa Soup



Yvon Chouinard, Patagonia founder, was inspired by his travels in the Himalayas to develop this barley soup,

comprised of four different roasted whole grains and dried vegetables. We liked the soup as a core-warming appetizer, but many felt it needed something extra to boost flavor and calories. Wild Sockeye Salmon (also available from Patagonia, \$12) and a shot of hot sauce saved the day.

► \$6.50 (2 servings); 2.4 oz.;
patagoniaprovisions.com
 

Good To-Go Classic Marinara with Penne



This hearty brown-rice penne with thick, tangy, herb-laced tomato sauce is one of the few

recipes that a large group of people with very different eating habits and requirements can all agree on. "I didn't even realize it was gluten-free because the pasta was perfectly al dente," one tester says. Some testers found the sauce's tomato paste flavor a bit strong—but adding Parmesan or Tabasco helped.

► \$6.75 (1 serving); 3.5 oz.;
goodto-go.com  

Staff pick Replace a broken buckle in a flash (no sewing!) with Sea to Summit's Field Repair Buckle (seatosummit.com).

[BREAKFAST]

Nature's Path Qi'a Superfood Hot Oatmeal

Thanks to its blend of whole seeds and grains, this instant breakfast cereal is more filling than most. Chia, crunchy pumpkin seeds, coconut shavings, quinoa, buckwheat, and hemp deliver a powerhouse of plant-based protein, fiber, and omega-3s. "I had enough energy to hike straight through until lunch without a snack," one tester says. Tip: Sweeten with honey, brown sugar, or dried fruit. Our favorite flavors: Cinnamon Pumpkin Seed and Creamy Coconut.

▶ \$5.60 for 6 packets; 1.4 oz. per packet; naturespath.com  

Alpine Aire Strawberry Granola with Milk

Sure, you could pack separate bags of powdered milk, dried fruit, and granola. Or you could carry this easy-prep breakfast that weds it all in one package. Crunchy clusters of granola with slices of freeze-dried strawberries deliver 13 grams of protein per serving. We loved it both hot and cold.

▶ \$4.40 (2 servings); 6.5 oz.; 360 calories; alpineaire.com 

[SNACKS]

Tahoe Trail Bar



Dense and delicious, these bars are made with whole ingredients you can actually identify, like raisins, coconut, chocolate chunks, sunflower seeds, and peanuts. The chewy bars make a satisfying rest-break snack with 310 calories (higher than average).

▶ \$15 for 6; 2.6 oz. per bar; tahoe-trailbar.com  

ProBar Bite



At 190 calories per bar, this chewy, two-bite morsel is a mini version of a longtime tester fave, ProBar's Meal Bar. "It has everything I love about the bigger bar—a blend of raw fruits, nuts, and seeds—but in a snack size that's perfect for quick calories," one fan says.

▶ \$1.50; 1.6 oz.; theprobar.com  

KIND Strong & Kind Bars



If you're tired of chocolate and peanut butter bars, try these savory snacks. Packed with 100 percent whole ingredients, these bars are extra crunchy and deliver 10 grams of protein, about the equivalent of one serving of beef jerky. Flavors: Honey Smoked BBQ, Honey Mustard, Roasted Jalapeño (our favorite), Hickory Smoked, and Thai Sweet Chili.

▶ \$2; 1.6 oz.; 230 calories; kindsnacks.com 

[DESSERT]

Salazon Chocolate



Shelves are overflowing with gourmet chocolate bars these days, but Salazon is our

new favorite. Made in Maryland from 100 percent organic, Rainforest Alliance- and Fair Trade-certified Hispaniola beans, each dark chocolate bar is sprinkled with natural sea salt. The company does this not only to bring out the dark chocolate's flavor, but to deliver 190mg of sodium to help replenish electrolytes. And it makes the best s'more ever. "The salty—even savory—flavor of the chocolate contrasts with the sticky sweet of roasted marshmallows," said one tester after a camping trip in Yosemite. The sub-3-ounce bars come in eight flavors; we love coffee best.

▶ \$4; 2.8 oz.; salazon-choc.com  

Backpacker's Pantry Coconut Key Lime Pie



Testers loved the light and fluffy texture of this deconstructed pie made of

a lime- and coconut-flavored vanilla custard. The tangy bite of lime from real lime juice powder keeps the dessert from becoming cloyingly sweet. Prep is a snap—just add cold water, beat vigorously with a fork, then sprinkle the included graham cracker crumbs over the top.

▶ \$6.90 (2 servings); 4.5 oz.; backpackers-pantry.com



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kids'



[TREKKING POLES]

Black Diamond First Strike

Kids may not need trekking poles to save their knees like Mom and Dad do, but they sure feel cool when they get to use them. That's the consensus among our staff parents, who believe that happy kids hike longer. These sturdy, two-section poles adjust from 26 to 43 inches, so they work for children ages 3 to 14 (5-foot adults also find them practical). Downsized rubber grips are easy for little hands to grasp, as is the single FlickLock mechanism.

► \$55 per pair; 13.9 oz. (pair); blackdiamondequipment.com



[SOCKS]

Point6 Kid's Hiking Tech Medium Crew

Do not send your kid out with cheap cotton socks if you want them to like hiking. What really distinguishes this merino wool pair is how well they've held up through about 25 wash/dry cycles (credit the 31 percent nylon). They haven't shrunk a bit, show minimal pilling or wear, and have maintained their cushion after thousands of sock-footed steps around the house and camp.

► \$14; 2 oz. (M); point6.com



[CAMP BOOTS]

Bogs Kids Classic

"I have fallen in love with this boot and will never again take my daughter camping without them," says one editor. The waterproof and insulated boots are easy to slip into and require no knotting lessons. They kept little feet from freezing on chilly Rocky Mountain mornings when the kids tumbled out of the tent to run around in dewy grasses. They're warm enough for wet mountain conditions (in fact, the company rates them down to -30°F, though 0°F proved a more accurate comfort limit). They're not for hiking big miles, but for playing outdoors in cold and wet conditions, they're gold, which is why they're worth the hefty price. Bonus: They come in all sorts of fun colors and prints.

► \$78; 2 lbs. 2 oz. (10); bogsfootwear.com



[PUFFY]

The North Face Toddler ThermoBall Full Zip Jacket

We gave the grown-up version of this light, packable, and toasty jacket a 2013 Editors' Choice Snow Award, and our little ones agree: It rocks. Our kids seem to get wet even on dry days, and we were impressed with how the synthetic insulation stays warm and dries fast. Ideal for cool temps or as part of a layering system in deep freezes, the ThermoBall is a workhorse that you'll pass down from kid to kid to cousin.

► \$90; 6.5 oz. (4T); thenorthface.com



[BASELAYERS]

Patagonia Kids Capilene 3 Midweight Crew and Bottoms

If you're looking to save money, do it elsewhere. One editor who has three hard-on-gear boys says no kids' baselayers he's seen hold up like these. Sure, they wick well and dry fast, but the durability is what really sets these layers apart. His family had one pair (top and bottoms) that lasted through all three kids, albeit with a knee patch for the last in line.

► Crew: \$35; 5.5 oz. (M); Bottoms: \$35; 5.1 oz. (M); patagonia.com

Staff pick Kid's Organic Waffles (\$5 for 6, honeystinger.com) make the perfect trail treat for little ones.

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A photograph of two hikers with backpacks ascending a steep, rocky mountain trail covered in patches of snow. The sky is blue with some clouds.

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Drew and Cristina, both Oregon rangers, settle in for a night of testing the Exped Gemini IV (page 82) near Smith Rock State Park, Oregon.

Drew and Cristina Peterson / Bend, OR

For our busiest testers, backpacking isn't a hobby, it's a lifestyle. Here's what they've learned while living the dream.

1. Load your pack exactly the same way every time. It saves time, and makes you more efficient and organized.
2. Use all the dead space inside your pack. Stow kitchen stuff in your cookpot; use the space in your sunglasses case for floss, extra batteries, lip balm, or a small tube of sunscreen (place your glasses in a microfiber bag to prevent scratching). If you have sleep-only clothes, store them in your sleeping bag.
3. Pack light. Aside from socks and undies, we rarely take more than one change of clothes.
4. Ditch the top lid of your pack when you can. It collects extra stuff like a pothole catches rain.
5. Pack a 6-by-4-foot rectangle of Tyvek near the top of your pack. It costs pennies, weighs nothing, and can serve as a ground cloth, emergency shelter, sunshade, and snow seat.

402

Combined # of field days in 2014

12

of products tested last year

Drew
55 lbs.

Cristina
35 lbs.

heaviest load carried

Most challenging situation Getting caught above treeline in a surprise thunderstorm in Oregon's Three Sisters Wilderness. The pressure fell so fast we could hear ringing in our ears. One bolt struck so close that Drew felt a jolt in the fillings of his teeth.

PHOTO BY TYLER ROEMER

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